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ON INFINITE EARTHS

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MARV WOLFMAN

BASED ON A STORY
BY MARV WOLFMAN & GEORGE PÉREZ

The Flash is depicted in a dynamic pose, running towards the viewer. He is surrounded by a chaotic scene of shattered glass and debris, suggesting a recent battle or a barrier being broken through. The background is a bright, hazy white, contrasting with the dark, starry space on the right side of the cover.

THE MULTIVERSE IS DYING.

IF EVER
A HERO
WERE NEEDED,
IT IS NOW.

Trapped in a timeless limbo,
Barry Allen, the Flash can only
watch in silent and helpless
horror as, one by one, countless
universes fade from
existence in order to feed the
insatiable need for power of the
Anti-Monitor, a being from the
anti-matter universe of Qward.
Under the guidance of the
Monitor, his benevolent
opposite, the super-heroes and
villains of all realities are
brought together for a last, des-
perate stand against the forces
that promise the literal
end of all existence.



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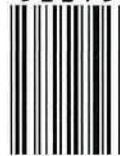
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WORLD BY WORLD... THE MULTIVERSE DIES SCREAMING!

Earth-1. Earth-2. Earth-S. Earth-X. Earth-Prime.

Across infinite time and space there are an infinite number of universes on different planes of existence, all coming into being at the very moment of the Big Bang. Across these infinite universes are an infinite number of planet Earths, some so radically different from the world we live upon as to be unrecognizable, others as familiar as your own backyard, most falling somewhere in between. On a world that was to be known as Earth-2 there first came into being a host of super-powered heroes with powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary men, heroes with names like Superman, Batman, Flash, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern. And, as on Earth-2 so went the rest of the Multiverse, with many worlds giving rise to heroes of their own, some near doppelgangers of the metahuman population of that world, others with no heroes at all.

But no matter their similarities, whatever their differences, each and every universe across the Multiverse has one thing in common: they are, like falling dominoes across infinity, being destroyed, worlds vanishing into an endless cloud of antimatter, snuffing out uncountable trillions of lives...including those of some of the greatest heroes of all worlds!

One by one, countless universes are fading from existence in order to feed the insatiable need for power of the Anti-Monitor, a being from the anti-matter universe of Qward. Under the guidance of the Monitor, his benevolent opposite, super-heroes and villains of all realities are brought together for a last, desperate stand against the forces that promise the literal end of all existence.

Continued from front flap

Now, the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the epic 1985 comic book miniseries by writer Marv Wolfman and artist George Pérez that forever changed the face of the DC Universe, are retold in this dramatic new novel, seen, for the first time, through the eyes of police scientist Barry Allen, a.k.a. the Flash, the Fastest Man Alive. It has fallen to this one brave, doomed hero to single-handedly save the universe from annihilation...at the cost of his own life!

The Multiverse is dying. If ever a hero were needed, it is now.

MARV WOLFMAN has had an award-winning career in comic books that has spanned five decades. He is the creator of some of comics' most memorable characters, including The New Titans (with artist George Pérez), Nightwing, Deathstroke the Terminator, and Vigilante for DC Comics, and Blade the Vampire Slayer, Nova, Bullseye, and Black Cat for Marvel Comics. Marv has written virtually every character at DC and Marvel, including Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, and the Fantastic Four, as well as the *Howard the Duck* newspaper comic strip, numerous live action and animated TV shows (including the recent *Teen Titans* on Cartoon Network), children's books, novels, and stage shows. Among his many accomplishments was a stint as Marvel's editor-in-chief, a DC Comics senior editor, one of the founding editors of *Disney Adventures Magazine*, as well as a 16-year run as the writer of *The New Titans*, and an unforgettable 70-issue run on Marvel's *Tomb of Dracula*. He was the writer of the classic, history-changing miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths* from which this novel is adapted. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is Marv's fourth novel.

Jacket designed by Georg Brewer

Jacket art by George Pérez and Alex Ross

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Continued on back flap

CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

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BY MARV WOLFMAN

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CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

for
Julius Schwartz
Gardner Fox
&
John Broome

their dreams of other universes inspired generations to follow their own
dreams

for
George Perez

who worked beside me to share that dream with others

and most of all

for
Noel

for fulfilling all my dreams

Preface

From the Journal of Barry Allen Earth-1

When I was a boy I had two loves: movies and comic books. My favorite movie was *"The Adventures of Robin Hood,"* and my favorite comic was *All-Flash*. Each issue featured the incredible stories of the Flash, a super-hero who ran so fast you could barely see him. His secret identity was research scientist Jay Garrick and somehow he got his powers from inhaling the fumes of heavy water.

Yeah. Tell me about it.

Even as a kid I knew enough about science to realize heavy water fumes couldn't give Jay a bad headache let alone amazing super-speed powers. But I also knew that like the similarly helmeted Roman god, Mercury, Jay was merely a character of myth, as real as a writer's imagination, and origins, whether born on Mount Olympus or drugged by impossible gases, weren't important.

I loved his stories and adventures. I loved his villains, but more than anything else, I loved pretending one day I could be him.

After all, I knew I'd never fly like Superman, or find a magic ring capable of creating anything out of energy like Green Lantern, or even have an invisible plane like Wonder Woman. But I could run, and maybe, somehow, I could learn to run real fast.

Just like Jay Garrick. Just like the Flash.

It didn't matter to me then that he wasn't real.

Though, when I learned he was, for some inexplicable reason, I wasn't surprised.

Nor was I shocked when I became more like him than I had ever dreamed.

As usual, I'm running ahead of myself. As I said, Jay Garrick was real. His origin? Well, heavy water was involved, but there was actually more to it than just that.

Jay was a living, breathing research scientist, and I knew it was his interest in science, related to me in those brightly colored pages, that inspired my own interests, even though Jay didn't live on the same Earth as I...

Let me slow down and start over again.

Even before I learned there was something called a multiverse, I knew scientists theorized the existence of many alternate dimensions, each one separated by the slimmest of temporal vibrations.

If I existed on, let's call it Earth-1, then there could also be an Earth-2, an Earth-3, and so on.

There was almost no limit to the number of Earths that could theoretically exist. Some of these worlds may have developed parallel evolutions where there might be another Barry Allen, police scientist. But on another Earth, Barry Allen could just as well be a composer or an assembly line worker.

On still other Earths, evolution may have spun off in a completely different fashion. The entity intended to be Barry Allen might be little more than a sentient slug, although I've been called that more than once in my life.

Finally, on some Earths, there might be moments of similarities even when there were also wild divergences.

That was how I saw my world, Earth-1, and Jay Garrick's world, Earth-2.

When a writer on Earth-1 dreamed the adventures of a super hero named the Flash, which he then turned into my favorite comic book, he had, unbeknownst to himself, tapped into the true history of Earth-2.

Our Earths were similar, and yet very different. There were heroes named Superman on both worlds who came from a planet called Krypton. Although at birth one was named Kal-L and the other a similar Kal-El, once they landed on their respective Earths the infants both received the name Clark Kent.

There was also a Wonder Woman on both Earths who used the secret identity, Diana Prince. But at the same time there were two completely different Green Lanterns.

Mine, the one from Earth-1, received his power ring from a race of alien Guardians dedicated to preserving peace throughout the universe. Earth-2's Green Lantern had a power ring with magical origins.

Crisis on Infinite Earths

Similarities and differences. Neither better nor worse. Just different. Many Earths, many dimensions, all separate. Nobody knew how this developed, whether by chance or circumstance, but as long as the universes remained separate, nobody needed to worry.

And so it went. There was a multiverse of Earths and heroes, some nearly identical to the other, most radically different. Jay and I were very different people yet we both became the Flash.

But, if you're wondering what was the biggest difference between Jay and me, it may be that by the time this is read, he will be retired, sunning himself on his lawn in Keystone City, while I will be long dead.

PART ONE

THE SUMMONING

He ran, faster than he ever had before, passing the speed of sound, even outracing the speed of light, becoming part of a Force so powerful it controlled him as much as he controlled it.

—The Monitor Tapes Pg. 311

One

The third time I watched myself die I sat back and enjoyed the show.

It's not as if one ever really gets used to watching themselves die. But I had, through the multiple viewings, become detached from the actual event. Even though it was my flesh dissolving and my bones crumbling, it wasn't as if it was happening to me here and now.

I was watching my future, a future as certain as the past. And in that future I was Monty Python's dead parrot singing in that invisible choir. End of story. Done deal. Over and out. *Chirp!*

Still, I can barely explain what went through my mind that very first time. Of course there was denial. The body? It had to be some other Flash from some other Earth. No way it was me.

But of course it was. I was alive and I was watching myself die like it was a movie trailer for my death, coming soon to a cemetery near you.

How was it possible? Just an instant before I was with my wife, Iris. How could I have been there and then, in the next moment, gone?

The well documented stages of denial: I saw. I refused to believe. Then I screamed. I cursed even though there was no one to hear me, but I cursed, which I didn't do often.

I ran away. I came back but my body was already gone, dissolved into nothingness, only my ring and my uniform, my tattered uniform, remained.

And all that happened in a singular. Frozen. Moment.

Time stood still, but I was used to that. My internal clock regularly moved faster than imagination. Unless I concentrated and forced myself to slow down and live in the real world, everything around me moved in slow motion; all sounds deepened and stretched long, impossible to understand.

I stared at that empty place where I died less than a second before and I heard myself crying and laughing and chattering.

Then I broke free and ran away as fast as I could and this time I didn't come back.

That was my virgin death experience.

The second time I saw myself die was only marginally better. I still refused to believe what happened, but my brain was slowly grinding its way into gear. That was me who had died. Or who *will* die.

Thought one: Since this was obviously taking place in the future, was it possible I could prevent it? Thought two: No. My future was set. You can't change the future. I was dead. Live with it. Thoughts three through six: What killed me? Was I the only one affected? Were there others? How could I help them?

As my body crumbled to ash, I again went into shock. I tried to fight my way out of it, but found that I couldn't. Instead, I sped up my metabolism and pushed my way through. Okay. I'm dead. Get over it. Do something about it.

Which is what I did.

The third time, this last time, I was finally able to separate myself from the experience. Barry Allen was a forensic scientist. I needed to study my death. Analyze it. Learn from it. Then use what I learned to help others.

That's what I did as a scientist. That's what I do as a person.

As my flesh disintegrated, I observed burn marks at the ragged edges. They weren't caused by fire. Assuming the power necessary to disintegrate flesh and bone, I decided I'd been attacked by some sort of energy blast. Unbelievable? No. Been there, I thought, though not exactly with this result. I've led a life others would call science fiction, and energy blasts, the good kind and the bad, were definitely part of it.

I thought about and quickly dismissed the usual suspects: Mirror Master? No way. He would turn me into plate glass if given the chance, but energy bolts? Not his M.O. The Pied Piper? He'd play a tune on his flute and force me to take a long run off a short pier. Captain Cold? He'd love to turn me into a Flashsicle. But burning me? Definitely not his style.

I knew the Cheetah, if given the chance, would strangle the life out of Wonder Woman and the Joker would gladly put a bullet into Batman, but I'd always taken some sort of perverse pride knowing my rogue's gallery of foes seemed to possess a greater theatricality in orchestrating their attacks.

It never prevented me from stopping them as quickly as I could, but their ingeniously complex plans actually made my battles with them a little more interesting than taking on your common variety thug.

This attack, however, was devoid of their usually demented elan, which proved to me none of them were responsible.

I wasn't getting anywhere. I knew how I died, so, for the present, I put aside the who.

My next question was: where did I die?

That was when I realized the world surrounding me was out of focus. There was light and color, but everything was swirling around me like I was inside a kaleidoscope.

Images blurred past faster than even I could see, and it wasn't just the world that was moving.

I was running faster than sound, faster than light, faster than I'd ever attempted before, and I didn't even know it.

I wasn't on Earth. I wasn't in space. I was in some place I'd never been.

I also accepted that I was very calm, as if I belonged here. Although I knew I would soon be dead, at this precise moment I still existed. I wasn't in heaven and my calmness belied any possibility of this being hell. So, where was here? And how did I get here?

Suddenly, I remembered.

The wall of white energy.

Two

I want to talk about Iris.

She was a reporter, I was a policeman. We met over the death of a mobster; she was hunting for a juicy murder story, but I ruled his death a mundane suicide. She distrusted cops; we existed to make her job difficult. I disliked reporters; they cared less for facts than for headlines.

We were natural enemies.

She glared at me. "Look, I need one picture. Just say yes and I'll be out of your crew cut in thirty seconds." Her eyes lit up with righteous indignation as she planned to the last detail how to kill me if I turned her down.

"When we're done." I was, as always, polite and professional. "No photographers will be allowed in until then."

"My deadline's in five minutes." She wasn't going anywhere.

"It's going to be another hour. Trust me, he'll still be dead."

"C'mon...."

I needed to do my work without interruption. "Officer, please move these people behind the tape."

"Dammit. You are the most obnoxious, conceited..."

I was in love with her five seconds after we met.

It was obvious she was beautiful, which was in no way a turn-off, but there was a fierce intelligence behind her bright hazel-green eyes as well as a deep, wicked gleam that told me this was a woman who enjoyed her life.

Iris had a cutting, dirty sense of humor and was easily the only woman who ever made me laugh. It's not that she told jokes per se, she just saw the world in a peculiar skewed way that... tickled me.

The myth of the science geek with his nose permanently buried in a

book, test tube in hand, who couldn't get a date even if he paid for one didn't hold true for me. I'd dated a number of beautiful girls both in high school and college, but Iris was the kind of beautiful I couldn't get out of my mind. Not that I let her know that on our first date. Or the second.

Or maybe never enough. I tend not to let my emotions show all that often. That's one of those science geek myths that *is* true.

I don't know anyone who can explain why one falls in love. We certainly shared a few interests, especially movies and music, but we rarely had the same opinions. Politics? Opposite ends of the spectrum. Art? I was into impressionism. She could talk for hours about dada and I still wouldn't get it. She was a reporter who had extensively traveled the world while I was pretty much a homebody stuck in Central City and generally pleased to be there.

I was fairly quiet while Iris, well, quiet wasn't one of those adjectives that readily came to mind. Though we were obviously drawn to each other, it shouldn't, by all rights, have worked out.

If I have any regrets it's that we dated for far too long. Why hadn't I proposed to her after that first picnic lunch? Or during dinner the next night or any time over the next few years? There were so many opportunities and I wasted them all.

What was I waiting for?

The answer should have been obvious. As fast as I am now, that's how slow I used to be. Slow, as in methodical. Take your time, Barry. Be sure before you make a move. Double-check your findings. Then check them all over again.

A necessity in science. A preposterous waste of precious time in life.

What would we have been like if we'd gotten married before the lightning shattered those bottles, spraying me with a catalogue of chemicals, turning me into some kind of speed-freak?

Would we have had kids? How old would they be today? Would our lives have been gingerbread, picket-fence normal or would we have been touring the world always in search of a new adventure? I could easily see myself at her side, going wherever the new story was, meeting sultans and pirates and....

... all that incredible stuff I loved reading about in those wonderful, musty old comics.

Usually I don't dwell on those woulda, coulda, shouldas, those life journey regrets; can't change the past, they always say.

Though isn't that what I needed to do now?
Change the past.
And change the future.
I had to change the future.

That wall, that wall of white energy.
Antimatter.

Whatever it touched disintegrated instantly.

The newscasts said one million died in the first twenty minutes. I know that estimate was low.

I kissed Iris goodbye, said I'd be back as quickly as I could, then I took off at near light speed.

The wall was more than two hundred feet high and a half mile wide. Skyscrapers disappeared as it engulfed them. And people, they just ceased to be. A beating heart. A life. A child. An elderly couple. A young woman. A frightened man. One moment, a plea for help. The next, nothing.

I saved more than one hundred only to see them vanish a heartbeat later in that terrible white wall.

Their deaths were horribly that simple.

Then it came for me. I turned to run but I was surrounded. I sped up my metabolism, hoping to put on enough speed to burst through to the other side. But it was impossible. I was surrounded by silent whiteness.

I thought of Iris. The antimatter would soon be coming for her, too.

She may already be dead.

For a nanosecond I felt impossibly cold.

Then I felt nothing.

My last thought was that I hadn't told her how much I loved her.

Alexander Luthor Earth—3

Alexander Luthor didn't know that in the cosmic crisis already in motion his universe and his world were about to be destroyed, He was also unaware that he had a doppelganger on a world called Earth-1, Lex Luthor, a criminal mastermind who fought a great hero named Superman.

Alex would have been further stunned to know there was a second version of himself on Earth-2, this one an insane scientist named Alexei Luthor. That Luthor would have been more than anxious to destroy his planet, and himself, if it also meant the elimination of his long-fought rival, a much older and slightly less powerful Superman.

Alex's planet, which would be known as Earth-3, was one of the many anomalies that existed in the multiverse. His world was ruled by super-powered criminals such as Ultraman, his world's Superman; Power Ring, Earth-3's Green Lantern, and Owlman, Batman's genetic double, among others.

Unlike the rest of those on his planet, Alexander Luthor, who shared a tenuous DNA relationship with all the other Luthors in the multiverse, had no criminal inclinations. He was a scientist, inarguably his Earth's greatest.

He was twenty-two when he discovered a permanent cure for the six deadliest forms of cancer. By twenty-six, he had eliminated most genetic diseases and by twenty-nine, he had perfected an inexpensive desalinization process.

As long as Alex didn't interfere with the Crime Syndicate, which is what Ultraman and the other villains called themselves, he was left alone to do whatever he wanted.

Alex was the first to note the temperature changes that suddenly overtook Earth-3. The polar ice cap was melting at a rate greater than global warming would have suggested.

Countries within a thousand miles of the north and south poles sweltered under unbearable heat and humidity while a sudden, blistering ice storm circled the globe at the equator. Tornadoes ravaged central Europe and hurricanes blew terrible winds and rain over the deserts.

The red skies came next. They blanketed the globe, blotting out the sun and stars, casting the world in a deep, dark scarlet haze.

Luthor investigated the aberration but found nothing wrong. Yes, the sky was red, but no, there were no apparent toxins in the air, no discernable reason for the change. *What was going on?*

Luthor returned home to his wife, the former Lois Lane.

In school he never thought of himself as a ladies man; as far as he was concerned he was a living cliché with his nose always buried in his books. For a long time he preferred it that way.

Lois was a fledgling reporter assigned to do a Sunday supplement fluff piece on Alex Luthor, the world-famous inventor of the flying car. Sitting down on the couch across from her, he thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, which, by his own twisted logic, meant she was better than him.

As he stared at her, stammering his way through her questions, he kept repeating his mantra: O.O.M.L. *Out. Of. My. League.* Still, she was surprisingly easy to talk to.

Within fifteen minutes Lois had already set her sights on him. She had three qualities that she demanded in a man. Thus far everyone she had ever dated failed them all. Luthor had not.

A: The man was incredibly intelligent. He could talk about anything, and the way he told his stories, pulling in facts here and adding bits of arcane information there, made them both riveting and funny. That also covered her B requirement: he made her laugh. Most men made her gag.

C: The last but most important quality: He was honest. On Earth-3 that was a commodity desperately hard to find. That his beautifully shaped bald head, framed by that perfectly trimmed red beard, made him drop dead gorgeous, was a nice bonus, but nothing more.

The more he pulled away, the more she pushed her way through his stammering and shyness until they both were in love. She knew what she wanted even if he did not.

He liked her even before she put on her glasses and began their interview. She was smart; he had read her columns and knew that before they met, but she actually laughed at his stupid jokes. Not even his mother did that. But more important, he could talk to her about anything.

Alex had always been shy, preferring test tubes to talk, but Lois drew him out the way nobody else ever had.

It wasn't a surprise to any of their friends that they married less than four months after that first meeting.

"You okay?" He asked her that same question almost every hour on the hour.

"Relax. Nothing's happening today. I feel great."

"You're sure you don't need anything?"

Lois sighed. He was hopeless. She was pregnant with their first child, and was more beautiful than Alex could remember.

Dinner was meatloaf, garlic mashed potatoes, and glazed carrots. She also prepared a chocolate souffle for dessert. Not their usual fare, but Lois was feeling especially edgy; she spent the day cooking and cleaning, not something she ever enjoyed doing. She was nesting, which she knew meant the baby was due any minute.

"I don't get it. The weather patterns are insane." He picked his way through the potatoes. They were his favorite, but his mind was elsewhere.

"They're not based on ocean currents. There's no reason for the sudden polar warming or the tornadoes or any of it. And those red skies. God, nothing makes any sense."

Whenever his thoughts wouldn't coalesce, he would talk to Lois. She exerted an eerie calming effect that let his mind wander until the solution, as if from nowhere, suddenly came, full blown.

She took his hand and led him to their bedroom. "C'mon. You need a snuggle."

They lay coupled together, spooning, his hand caressing her swollen stomach with no way of knowing their child would be born before the night was out.

"It's going to be a girl. I can tell"

Lois laughed. "A boy. Feel his kick. Definitely a boy."

But born to what? He wondered. Weather anomalies? Red skies? Were they a harbinger of something else? He turned to Lois but she was already asleep. *Good. She needs it.*

Alex went to his study, softly closed the door, and poured himself some coffee. Skies don't color shift without reason. Something weird

was happening, but he had no idea what. "Give me a clue," he said aloud. "Anything will do."

Alex started when he heard a voice reply, "The red skies are just the beginning."

He looked, but no one was there. He checked his security alarm. The warning light was glowing a steady, safe green. "Where are you?"

"Alexander, a wall of antimatter will sweep over this planet and destroy everything," the voice continued.

"You know me? Who are you?"

"This planet is already dead, but there are other Earths that can still be saved."

"Other Earths?"

"Alex, you need to save your son."

"My son?"

"This is what you have to do."

Alexander Luthor listened.

Three

I knew I wasn't on Earth but I also wasn't in space. There was no ground under me, yet I was able to run. Actually, I couldn't stop running. Without any effort on my part, my speed kept increasing.

I was surrounded by silence, which usually meant I was running faster than sound.

A moment later everything went white; I was faster than light. It was impossible, but I kept picking up speed, running even faster.

Images appeared in the shifting patterns of light and shade:

Superman. He was crying. The man I knew was impossibly strong, physically and spiritually. What could possibly have happened to him?

Kid Flash, Wally, my nephew, was also in tears, holding my ring in his hand. Next to him was the Psycho Pirate, one of our Justice League enemies.

There were more images, each overlapping the other like a cartoon flip book. Green Lantern was fighting some sort of black, featureless shadow creature. *What was it?*

Jay Garrick, the Flash of Earth-2, was surrounded by hundreds of the same shadow things.

Batman was battling the Joker. Suddenly, both of them looked at me.

"Flash?"

"Batman, can you see me?" I called to him but in another second they were both gone.

Supergirl was flying toward Gotham City.

I saw Captain Marvel. I knew he was from Earth-S. He was also fighting a shadow creature. Alongside him was the Robin of Earth-2. *How was that possible?*

They were from different Earths in different parts of the multiverse. What could have brought them together?

I saw heroes I knew who lived in the future and some who came from the past. They were all besieged by even more of those living shadows.

What were they? Where did they come from?

There were people I didn't know:

A green cloaked figure with dark, frightened eyes.

A woman, blond-haired, dressed in blue. She could fly.

I saw an infant. Half his body was flesh, but the other half dark as space with stars burning through his skin. *Who was he? What was he?*

I saw hands reach for the baby, place him inside a ship and then launch it into space.

I saw that damned white wall of antimatter again and I heard screams. They were awful and frightening, and then, just as suddenly, there was total silence.

I knew somehow that an entire universe had suddenly ceased to exist.

Was that even possible?

I ran faster as more images spun around me.

I found myself in a dark, stone room. I was a prisoner. Energy bonds restrained me. I struggled against them, trying to break free. Nothing worked. But then, suddenly, I was loose.

I was in another place. Not a room but a cavernous pit. In front of me was a globe of burning energy, fifty feet in diameter, and it was spinning like a top.

As if there were suddenly two of me, I saw myself, my other self, running around the blazing top. *What was I doing?* I could see myself struggling. Then, suddenly, there was a horrible burst of light and I disintegrated.

I was dead.

I knew then that I was being tossed through time.

I was in my laboratory at Central City Police headquarters. It was night. There was a calendar on the wall. Today's date was circled with a notation: *Date tonight with Iris. Don't be late.* That was underlined. Twice.

I knew this date. It was the night that changed my life.

In three seconds, a lightning bolt would crash through the window and shatter the bottles of chemicals stacked on the shelves above me. In four seconds, the chemicals would shower over me, changing me forever.

I watched myself lying on my office floor, unconscious. When I awoke, I was unaware how my life had changed.

I watched as I dried myself off. I was so innocent then. *Ahh*. Look at me. I just remembered I was late for my date. I was always late. Time had a way of running away on me.

"God, Barry," Iris would always say. "You are the slowest man on Earth."

Not any more. I began to run. Faster and faster. I had no idea what happened, but there I was, outrunning a car. The souls of my shoes were burning. Look at my face; I was afraid.

And yet, I was also enjoying myself.

By the time I was able to force myself to stop I had run all the way to Iowa.

There. *That* look. That's the moment I knew what had happened. As improbable as it may have been, those chemicals were my heavy water.

I'd become the Flash.

I'd become the super-hero who was my hero.

Four

The images continued to rush past me.

I was suddenly elsewhere; not on my Earth, but one I'd never seen before.

There were heroes here, as there were on so many Earths in the multiverse.

I saw this world's Superman, but he was black. Supergirl was his wife, not his cousin. Hawkman and Hawkgirl were brother and sister, not husband and wife.

There was a Batman and Robin here, too, but they were father and son and this Batman had a wife as well as two other children. Wonder Woman and Aquaman were also different.

I found this world's Flash. His name was Tanaka Rei and he was Japanese. His wife was Hoshi. They had two children, a boy and a girl. I watched them playing together, and...

I thought of Iris.

What if she and I had married earlier? Would our children be seven and eight, the same as these kids? Would our family be as loving?

What if—? What if...

This world was different from mine, but it was also too much the same.

Then I watched this Earth, and its universe, disappear. In an instant it had been destroyed.

Was this the fate of my Earth, too?

I was in my lab again, only I was dressed as the Flash instead of in Barry Allen's starched white lab coat. I remembered this day, too. It was several

years after the Flash had been born. Standing next to me was Iris's nephew, Wally West. He asked how I became the Flash. I told him about the accident when—*don't ask how*—lightning struck again.

I knew it was totally impossible. Such things couldn't happen twice. But the very same chemicals that turned me into the Flash also splashed over Wally.

He became my partner, Kid Flash.

I then found myself in the future and saw the Earth disappear. Just as quickly I was in the past as the white wall of energy swept across ancient Atlantis. In a fraction of a second the fabled island vanished from existence.

Where was I? Why was I being shown the end of all life?

"Flash." There was a voice but I was alone. "We were as you. Once swift as lightning, now gone."

"Where are you?" I ran in ever-widening circles searching for the source of the voice, but I was still alone.

There was a second voice, softer than the first. A woman.

"Untold millions of universes have already been removed from existence. Before the multiverse ends, our essences, your soul, and the speed force itself, will be destroyed."

A third voice chimed in. "We are becoming weaker."

"Speed force? Is that where I am? Talk to me."

I saw a place of metal walls. It was large and cavernous and through its windows I saw I was not on Earth.

Suddenly, the room was filled with hundreds of people. Most were costumed like me. I recognized some: Superman. Batman. Green Lantern. All of them had been brought to whatever this place was.

I looked around me to figure out where I was, but everything had disappeared.

And I was still alone.

Five

The one fact I cobbled together was that somewhere the heroes of many Earths would be, or already had been, brought together to fight whatever was destroying the multiverse.

Despots always wanted something. Unlimited wealth, absolute control, or the number one answer: total power. But why would anyone want to destroy entire universes? What would be left for them to control? Who would there be to rule?

I understood one other truth: Sometime during this crisis I had been captured and, in trying to escape, killed. Only that would explain Wally finding my costume and ring.

Whatever happened, I'd been shown, much too graphically in fact, that I was not going to survive.

I could accept that; I'd been running on borrowed time ever since I first put on my Flash suit. But what I wanted to know was if there was any way I could stop this... *crisis*... before I died?

The voices told me I was already dead. But my essence, they said it was my soul, was still alive.

I was already dead? *Nonononono*. Not possible. My death was in the future. But if it already happened, did that also mean it wasn't preventable?

And if I was murdered, then why didn't I remember it now? It made no sense. How could I be dead? How could this body just be...

My soul?

I wasn't a very religious man but I certainly believed in God or at least in some kind of almighty spirit. I was killed but I was still here, still thinking.

There had to be a reason I didn't vanish from existence.

I needed to organize and analyze the facts as I would any puzzle. It was the only way I could think my way through this.

Brain-boy Barry (they called me that in high school) was hard at work again.

I knew I'd been a prisoner. I saw myself chained to a wall and I needed to find out where that took place. Once I had the where, I might discover the who.

Question two: why did he hold me prisoner? Why didn't he just kill me right away?

Question three: And if I was dead, why didn't I stay dead?

There was only one logical answer to my second question: I was needed, or more likely, my super-speed power was needed.

The voices said the speed force would be destroyed even before the multiverse, which I assumed meant the killer was absorbing my super-speed energy to power his weapons.

Was that why I was his prisoner? Was that why the speed force was weakening? If this speed force dissipated before I saved the universe would I disappear along with it?

Was there a ticking clock on my saving the multiverse?

Slow down. Don't ask questions to which I can't possibly guess the answer. Don't think in terms of saving an infinite number of lives; the task would be too daunting. Concentrate instead on what was possible.

Save Iris. Save just one life. Then the others will fall into place.

I was still in the speed force watching the past, present, and future scroll by me. I saw the dawn of man. Before that, I saw an explosion of light, and before that a swirling nothingness. There was nothing before that. The present was constantly shifting, but the future I saw was finite. I saw tomorrow and the year and the millennium after that. But after that there was nothing.

In the future, there was nothing.

That future was also moving closer. A year was suddenly shaved off it. Then another. Time was being eaten away.

Did that mean our unknown enemy succeeded? Did that mean we failed to stop him before we could even try?

I've never accepted failure as a possibility. Despite seeing it, the future was not yet written. I knew it could be changed.

It had to be changed.

But not from inside the speed force.

If there was a chance to affect the outcome, I had to return to the real world.

My only question was—*how?*

Pariah—Universe Unknown

He watched the world die as he had countless worlds before. That he was brought here, to Earth-19 by his count, meant there was no hope for its survival.

As always, the weather changed drastically, blistering heat and intense cold. Ice caps melted. There were floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Hurricanes ravaged cities.

Sadly for him, it was always the same.

In the next minutes he would look for the red skies. These were, in of itself, harmless, but, as always, it foretold the planet's final doom.

The shadow demons appeared at the same time as the wall of white antimatter. Both swept across the planet and destroyed everything they touched. But what always bothered him the most were the desperate cries from the people who prayed for a salvation that would never come.

He knew it was only a matter of hours before this universe, and its uncountable population, was erased from existence. Men and women ran in panic, grabbing their children, hoping to find a safe haven.

They couldn't know there was no safe place.

And never once, not since this all began, had there been any hope.

His green cloak billowed in the wind, and dust stung his large black-rimmed eyes, forcing tears he thought had long ago ran dry.

"Haven't I suffered enough?" he shouted, though there was no one to hear him. "Don't make me watch this any more."

Many planets had super-heroes and in each on-going destruction Pariah knew they would come together, sometimes even with their enemies at their

side, and use their powers to fight the shadow demons or try to stop the ever-encroaching antimatter wall.

But the heroes were always helpless.

Their pain would soon be over, but his, as always, continued. "Why do I have to keep living through this hell again and again?"

He already knew the answer. He had sinned and this was his terrible punishment.

He was brought to each universe before it was destroyed and he was forced to watch its people die and hear their final cries. But worst of all, he had to accept that there was nothing he could do.

Once again he saw the white wall move silently across the planet, cutting short voices, discriminating against nothing, absorbing everything.

Everyone who died was innocent, but the children were the hardest for him to forget. Every so often one would see him staring helplessly at the destruction. In their innocence, they would reach out and plead with him to take their hand and pull them away from that cold, white wall.

Please. Help me. Don't let me die. Do something. Save me. Save my sister. Save my brother. Save my parents. Save my—

As always, Pariah would try, hoping this time would be different but always knowing it never would.

And, as always, he failed.

He took a child in his arms as antimatter swept over them. He held her close, hoping his immortal body would protect her. But, as the wall moved on, only he was left standing in the black nothingness. Even the planet he had been standing on was gone.

He felt the familiar burning inside his stomach. It told him he was about to be brought to yet another world in yet another universe. And when he got there, he would be forced to watch it die, too.

He cried out, "Why me?"

There was no answer.

As always.

Six

Even when I tried, the speed force wouldn't let me stop running. I wanted to slow down, but instead I found myself racing even faster. Strangely, as much as I knew that should have bothered me, it didn't. I felt at ease here, eerily calm.

Yes, I knew there was an urgency that demanded my attention. I was, after all, supposed to save the world. But I felt strangely at home in this place of speed.

I didn't want to leave.

Instead, I wanted to find the other speedsters, whoever they were. I wondered if they shared the same problems and concerns I once had?

Were they as impatient with everything as I used to be? Did the world move slowly for them, too? People took forever to think. One word conversations seemingly dragged on for months. *C'mon, man, move it. Spit it out. Say it already!*

For someone who had once been the slowest man on Earth, after I became the Flash I had to learn, of all things, patience. *Slow down. Listen to them. It's not their fault they're slow.*

I could live a whole life before they finished drinking a soda. I could be in Central City one moment and in Paris the next. I could eat a full banquet in an instant and metabolize it just as quickly.

Actually, I had to constantly eat. I burned food so fast it was the only way to keep my energy levels constant.

Learning to think slow, to walk instead of run, even re-learning how to breathe, seemed to take me forever.

I had to decrease my heart rate. I had to learn how long it took to lift a cup off a table. How much time to take a shower? How many breaths do

I draw in a minute? Do I run a mile in a blink of an eye, or do I let it take longer?

I had to re-learn everything I once took for granted.

Patience.

Slow down my vision so people appeared to walk normally. Slow down my hearing so instead of that annoying Doppler-induced buzz I could actually understand what they were saying.

My hardest lesson? Enjoy the process, not the results.

It wasn't easy.

But here, wherever here was, there were others who had gone through it all before me. I wanted to speak to them.

But...

Something kept nagging at me.

The outside world. The real world. *There was danger there, wasn't there?*

Oh, right, I remember now. Something about the end of the universe.

But it was so peaceful here. I belonged here.

I could die here.

Then—

Iris.

Beautiful Iris.

Waving goodbye. That sweet smile. A much too quick kiss, "See you soon," she said, although she never would.

Iris.

Was she still alive? Did the Earth still exist? Was the future still changeable?

Iris.

The speed force was drawing me into it and didn't want to let me go. This was to be my final home, but I knew I couldn't let myself rest. Not yet.

Yes, I can accept that I had already died, although, by the paradoxes of time, my death had not yet occurred. Yes, my world was destroyed, but that hadn't yet happened, either.

The future and the past were all the same here, and the longer I stayed, perhaps the happier I'd be.

But then everything else would be destroyed. Everyone I knew and cared about would be dead.

Actually, it would be worse. They never would have been.

I had to go home.

Seven

Time wrapped itself around me like an all-embracing blanket. I saw a young Cro-Magnon caveman try to disperse mastodons about to trample his small village.

Then the mastodons disappeared.

I saw Superman shouting in pain again. What in the universe happened to him?

I saw myself die again. This time I didn't bother to linger.

There was Supergirl hovering beside a rooftop next to Batgirl, precariously perched on a gargoyle. They were looking over the city, talking and laughing and I found myself smiling.

They were good people and I loved talking to both of them. Kara, Supergirl's Kryptonian name, loved movies more than Iris and almost as much as me.

We'd argue for hours in the JLA cafeteria, me drinking my tenth coffee—like I needed to be more wired—and she sipping from that bottle of water always stuck in her hand. What was the best Hitchcock or Spielberg film? Me: *Psycho* and *Raiders*. Her: *North by Northwest* and *ET*.

Kara came to Earth as a teenager. To her, movies were a way of catching up with a world she didn't know, and she embraced every frame she watched, good and bad. She even liked Ed Wood films. She accepted they were awful but she loved their unintentional humor.

She was so young, but Supergirl worked harder, was always optimistic and probably more dedicated to our cause than almost anyone I knew, including her cousin, Superman.

Batgirl was not related to Batman, and though she shared his crime-fighting techniques. When she took off that costume and became Barbara

Gordon again, she also became alive and funny and somebody Iris and I loved being with as often as we could.

Barbara was a librarian and researcher and Iris would call her at the weirdest hours to track down information for whatever story she was currently writing.

But I worried about her. She craved Batman's approval and, knowing him, I was certain he didn't parcel that out liberally.

I saw the Justice League of America fighting those demonic shadows. A long time ago I was one of them and I wished I was with them now.

Then I realized, the crisis the voices spoke about—it had come to my Earth.

I saw the young Cro-Magnon again, standing by a marsh, spear in hand. He'd been hunting for game. Three Neanderthals made their way to his side. Had the two species actually overlapped in time? I cursed myself for not remembering my prehistory.

Suddenly, the Cro-Magnon looked up beyond the marsh. His eyes widened as he saw something in the mist that frightened him. Whatever it was disappeared by the time I looked up.

He rubbed his eyes, dismissing the thought, then held up his spear to the others and grunted unintelligible sounds that probably meant, *The village needs food. Let's hunt.*

Suddenly, the marsh was gone and I was elsewhere.

I saw Batgirl again, but this time she was crying.

What happened?

Eight

I was on a spaceship of some sort.

No. It was a satellite and I was in a small laboratory. The boy I saw before, half flesh, half anti-matter—how did I know that?—was no longer an infant. I was looking at a three year old. Had that much time passed?

A woman flew into the room. She was human, blonde, very pretty and dressed in skintight blue armor. I'd seen her before. She examined the boy, not pleased with whatever she saw.

Another figure entered. He was male, humanoid but not human. Almost bald, his hair was shaped into a widow's peak of cornrow strands that lay flat across his forehead. He wore a white tunic over blue armor.

He talked to the woman. They smiled, even laughed.

Then the laughing stopped.

The happy look in her eyes abruptly changed. "I have to do this. I can't help myself," she said.

He nodded as if there was no alternative. "I've been waiting."

"You know he's controlling me?"

"That's his way, Lyla. You know that."

"Don't call me that. He doesn't like that name. He calls me Harbinger."

The male didn't respond.

"I don't want to hurt you. Please, Monitor, stop me from hurting you."

His name was *Monitor*?

"You know I can't do that, Lyla."

"Harbinger! Why can't you understand my name is Harbinger?"

"Harbinger then. Listen to me. I want you to forgive yourself."

"Are you trying to trick me?"

"No. That's for you to remember... *after*."

"What are you talking about, old man?"

He turned to her, dropping his hands to his side, resigned, or perhaps just anxious to get it over with. "It's time. Do what you have to."

She stared, her red eyes deepening to black. Her breathing became labored and her chest heaved. "I don't want to do it. I know you can stop me, so why won't you?" She was in tears.

If I knew what was coming, why didn't he? I ran at them, intending to push them apart, but instead I raced through both images.

I was still in the speed force while they were in the real world. I yelled at him, "Run, you idiot. She's going to kill you."

He turned as if he heard me, although I knew that was impossible. The look in his eyes seemed to say, "*It's for the best*."

He closed his eyes and lowered his head as she raised her hands. With a terrible scream she unleashed a blaze of golden fire.

He looked up, whispered some words to no one I could see, and then he was dead.

Lyla or Harbinger, fell to her knees and cried.

There was a flash of light, and I was back in time, but just two minutes ago. The Monitor was in the room. She entered. They talked. And she killed him again.

It happened three more times, as if I was watching a constant loop of a slow-motion replay. Was this some pivotal moment I was being shown until I understood it?

Who was the Monitor? Who was Lyla? Who made her kill him?

I watched him die a sixth time. As he fell at my feet, I instinctively reached to help.

"Now it's your turn," he said as he died again.

I was still in the speed force, watching the outside world. Was he already dead? Was this the past or the future?

How do I find you? How do I save you?

And then everything went black.

Nine

I barely heard the voices and couldn't tell where they came from.

"You understand the mission?"

"Don't worry. It's not a problem." I recognized the voice. It was the killer's voice.

"If you're sure, then it's time."

The voices were faint, a few words here and there filtered through, but nothing made sense. I was still in the Monitor's ship—*that was his name, wasn't it?*—but there was something different now.

Metal walls surrounded me; there was a floor under me. The lights here were dim and I heard the grinding noise of complaining engines below me.

I was no longer in the speed force.

I was on the Monitor's ship. His actual ship.

But how did I get here?

I remembered he died and I wanted to help. Then there was—blackness? Nothingness? Unconsciousness?

Just as suddenly, I was here.

Did I somehow bring myself here by saying I wanted to be here? Had I controlled the speed force, making it take me where I needed to go?

"We're going to need help." It was his voice. He was someplace near.

I realized this had to be the past. I'd seen the woman, Lyla, kill the Monitor. But I just heard him speak. He was still alive. That meant there was time to warn him about Lyla's future treachery.

The ship was designed like a globe, approximately one-half mile in diameter. The interior walls were black metal, a steel alloy similar in look to our own, but slightly different: oilier, slicker, even warmer to the touch.

I tapped the metal and it buckled slightly; the wall was paper thin. I tried to punch through it, but I was thrown back. Okay. Thin but very solid, it probably weighed next to nothing.

Our scientists would love to get a sample. If it was fireproof as well as unbreakable, I knew Ferris Aircraft would be making jet fighters out of this stuff as fast as they could get them off the assembly line.

I ran past a dozen laboratories crowded with equipment and machines. Some looked like weapons, but the majority were so alien in design I couldn't identify them let alone use them. I had four University degrees but I felt like Homer Simpson during a meltdown.

There was one thing I did recognize: view screens were built into the walls and all of them were showing scenes from different worlds.

I recognized Earth-2, Jay Garrick's Earth. The Monitor was observing not just one universe but the multiverse.

Good reception, too. Cable or satellite?

Duh. I looked around me. Definitely satellite.

On one screen I saw my own Earth and the sky was still blue. I'd been sent back in time to before the red skies, to before the shadow demons and the white wall of antimatter, to before my planet and my universe were destroyed.

I stared at the multiverse of worlds displayed on the view screens. Why was the Monitor watching them? I had seen Lyla kill him and I made the logical assumption she was a murderer and he was her victim.

But what if I was wrong? Was he the killer and was she trying to stop him?

Good guys and bad. It was getting harder to sort out who was who.

When I was a kid I played cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad. My friends liked playing the bad guys because they could shout as loud as they wanted and pretend to act tough. I preferred playing the good guy, even if the part at first appeared to be more boring.

I was too young to realize then that assigned definitions were not always clear. Cops and robbers? No problem. But cowboys and Indians? The movies always showed the Indians, tomahawks raised high, whoopin' and hollerin' as they attacked wagon trains and civilians.

Clearly they were the bad guys.

Only we knew now that wasn't necessarily the case.

The speed force voices inferred there was still time to save the multiverse. If there wasn't, why did they bother saving me? If Lyla killed the Monitor, then his death should have saved my world.

Evidence speaks for itself. That was the first thing I learned in the police academy. Emotion should have no role in determining guilt or innocence, good guys or bad.

There were fifteen levels on the satellite. I awoke on the ninth. Lyla and the Monitor were on the first. It took less than a second to find them.

Sometimes it was good to be the fastest man, dead or alive.

Ten

Lyla's eyes were blue, not red or black as I'd seen them before. And I saw them looking at the Monitor with respect, not hate.

The Harbinger I saw in the speed force acted as if she were anxious to kill him. This Lyla was very different. She was gentle. Her voice, softer. But it was her eyes that separated the two of them—there was no hate anywhere in them. In fact, she looked at him as if she loved him.

They didn't see me, even when I stood in front of them and waved my hands like an idiot to get their attention.

That proved I was dead. But did it mean I was a ghost? Was I only able to watch the universe go to hell or could I do something about it?

Patience. Sort out the evidence then figure out between the settler and the Indian, who was protecting whose home.

"But will they listen?" she asked. "I don't think they'll believe me." Lyla had an easy, relaxed smile, not at all as I'd seen her before.

The question asked itself: Were there two Lylas, two Harbingers?

"They'll believe. Maybe not at first, but when you show them the evidence..."

She laughed. "Yeah, right. I go up to these super heroes and villains and say, 'Excuse me, the multiverse is coming to an end' Then I say, 'See this?' I show them the proof. 'Oh, and why am I here?' they'll ask. 'Well, it's because we—we being me and some alien guy you've never heard of before—need you to save the universe for us.' I wouldn't believe that. Why should they?"

He didn't look at her but I could see he was smiling. "I'd leave out the part about an 'alien guy'." I couldn't tell if he was joking, but it made me laugh.

On one of the view screens I saw something that looked like a ten-story tall tuning fork cobbled together out of mismatched circuit boards, bailing wire and spit. Well, maybe it was a bit more sophisticated than that, but not much.

The Monitor waved his hands over a control panel. On the screen I saw a light on the fork turn itself on. "Unless you recruit an army to protect my machines, you know there's no hope."

Lyla stared at the view screen. "But will it work?"

"It has to, doesn't it?"

Lyla placed her palms together and held them in front of her yoga style. She closed her eyes and rested her head on her fingertips as if in prayer.

She was nothing like the woman I'd seen in the speed force. But someone—*who?*—was going to control her—*when?*—and, sooner or later, she was going to kill the Monitor—*why?*

"Don't let her go," I shouted, but the Monitor couldn't hear me. For some reason I screamed again then hammered my fist against his chest. It fell through him without affect.

I'd never felt so helpless.

Lyla's body shimmered and suddenly there were two of her. A second later there were four, then eight, and finally sixteen seemingly perfect copies. She had the power to duplicate herself.

There *was* more than one Lyla. Which one was going to kill the Monitor?

The Monitor studied the group. "Remember. Bring me only the ones I asked for."

The Harbingers bowed to him and then, as one, disappeared.

I wanted to follow, but which one? As fast as I was I couldn't, like her, be in sixteen places at the same time.

The Monitor turned in my direction. I knew he couldn't see me, but his eyes fixed on mine. *Had to be a coincidence. Had to be.*

"There are futures that can't be undone," he said.

He started out the room then paused at the door and looked back as if indicating for me to follow.

What else did I have to do?

Green Lantern—Earth—1

Jon Stewart glanced at the glowing green ring on his finger and allowed himself a wide grin. It had been only six months since the Guardians turned the Power Ring over to him, after its previous owner—Hal Jordan—retired, and only three since he was asked to join the Justice League of America. He still felt giddy every time he flew above the clouds, birds soaring at his side, tilting their wings, catching the currents.

This was the life, he thought. He could fly like this forever. Unfortunately, he was usually, like today, on his way to stem one emergency or another.

The ocean below him may have seemed endless, but Jon knew it would only be a matter of minutes before Australia rushed into view.

So many of the so-called super heroes—he didn't think of himself as one, but he knew others did; it came with the uniform and the pledge to duty—always looked, well, angry, or, in Batman's case, cold and emotionless.

"*We can fly*," he wanted to shout at them until he forced them to understand how miraculous it actually was. "Why are you taking this for granted? Look at all the incredible things we do. You gotta be enjoying this, man. You just *gotta*."

It seemed to Jon that Batman never got joy from anything. He was relentlessly grim and consistently uncommunicative, even to the Justice Leaguers who should have been his friends. If you got even a two word answer out of him—*huzzah!*—it was time to party.

Jon realized Batman was an irreplaceable member of their little adventurers clique, but that didn't mean he had to like the man.

Wonder Woman was also an enigma. She was beyond beautiful, always warm and friendly, but Jon sensed an unbridgeable gulf between her and the rest of the League. She should be standing alongside giants, battling

great mythological beasts and monsters, not stopping crimes in Washington, D.C.

Hawkgirl was an alien from a world Jon never heard of, but he related to her better than he did Wonder Woman. Zatanna was a sorceress with unbelievable magical powers, but the two of them often went clubbing, dancing to 70s disco, emptying one cafe or another, all the while talking 'til dawn.

But Wonder Woman. Jon was told she was an Amazon and that her mother once made love to the half-god Heracles.

Gods never walked the streets Jon Stewart grew up on.

Jon believed of all of them, Superman understood. Superman was the first and probably the most powerful of them. He never seemed to get angry or lose his temper, but he wasn't the boring boy scout Batman accused him of being, either.

Superman just believed in doing the right thing, as if the very possibility of there being any other option never crossed his mind.

He remembered the first time he met Superman was on a mission with the League. Some super-powered criminal was up to something evil, they always were. But Superman saw a civilian in danger and took time away from battle to rescue him.

The man kept thanking Superman. He pledged his life to him, probably would have given him his wife if asked, but Superman just shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "I was given these special abilities. Of course I use them to help." *Ofcourse, indeed.*

From anyone else that would sound preciously cloying, but not from Superman. Somehow it fit him.

Jon also noticed that Superman was also one of the few of them who never wore a mask. He never thought to hide who he was.

Sydney had been decimated by tsunamis, freakish three hundred foot waves that crashed through anything that stood in their way. Fort Denison, built to protect the city from invasion, its brick and stone crushed instantly to dust, fell into the sea first, churning up waves, swamping ferries and cargo boats that slowly chugged their way to the south shore.

Like the coat hangar for which it was affectionately nicknamed, the Harbour Bridge easily buckled, its rounded spans collapsing at their hinges.

The Circular Quay found itself buried under seventy feet of unseasonably icy water. The Opera House at Bennelong Point fell apart in seconds, its

great arches lost under the roiling foam. A minute later, hundreds of exotic animals died as flood waters ravaged the Taronga Park Zoo.

Jon concentrated. His will energized his power ring, giving it green light form and substance.

The light reshaped itself into giant emerald walls which Jon rammed into the harbor bed as protective shields against the terrible waves. The ocean pummeled furiously against them, but they held firm. That would do the trick for the moment, Jon thought. He turned to see the ocean was already crushing its way through the city.

He flew over the harbor and made his way to the city center where waves were about to crush the Queen Victoria building, its hundred year old Byzantine construction hiding a very modern mall.

It was two in the afternoon, the stores crowded with shoppers taking advantage of mid-week specials, not realizing their lives were close to being snuffed out.

"Not on my watch," he swore.

Jon closed his eyes, envisioning a massive curved tube like a water park slide. His power ring flashed its light, and formed a two-mile long tunnel which scooped up the waves and sent them crashing out to sea again.

Jon knew his walls would protect Sydney from new waves while his network of laced tunnels would redirect most of the water already in the city back out again.

Another crisis was averted, thank the Guardians.

The Guardians. He thought of his alien benefactors through whose diminutive blue-skinned frames coursed so much power. He had met them face-to-face on Oa, their home world, only once, but that was enough to understand who they were and for him to agree to become part of their mission.

They had come together countless ages ago to protect the universe from natural disasters and unwanted intrusions. Jon had no idea what started them on their crusade, but he knew they had somehow created an energy source of nearly limitless power. They contained it in a massive lantern-shaped device that could be tapped as needed by a power ring such as the one Jon wore.

Jon was only one of many ring wearers; he estimated there were more than three thousand Green Lanterns, as they called themselves, scattered across the universe.

The Lanterns were of different species and different cultures. To be privileged to become a ring wearer they had to agree to abandon their personal prejudices and act in concert alongside races, often those with conflicting beliefs from their own. They would no longer be serving just their own world, but an entire sector of space.

A Green Lantern could be called upon to negotiate treaties between warring worlds or to use the power of his ring to stop, if need be, that war.

Jon embraced the idea instantly.

Within weeks of becoming a Green Lantern he was asked to replace Hal Jordan, the former Lantern, in the Justice League.

In less than six month's time, Jon Stewart's life had changed completely. Despite all the dangers, he never thought it as anything other than for the better.

Jon realized the Australian tsunami was not a natural occurrence, no more so than the erupting volcanoes along the equator that Superman flew to investigate, or the frigid weather that swept across Africa. Wonder Woman and Hawkgirl were checking that one out.

His power ring indicated unnatural fluctuations in air pressure surrounding Sydney harbor, but nothing powerful enough to trigger such massive destruction.

The ring sensed something *powerful* was moving toward the planet, but it didn't know what.

He tried to use the ring to contact the Guardians, hoping they would know what to do. Knowing them, Jon assumed they had probably encountered these anomalies before.

Jon's signal died in transmission. Something—*whatever was causing the anomalies?*—was blocking it. The Guardian's energy was nearly limitless, he knew. What in the universe could be powerful enough to jam a power ring?

"Green Lantern?" The voice behind him was gentle and friendly.

He saw she was hovering about thirty yards away. She had blonde hair and wore blue armor. She was very pretty, but not remotely Jon's type. *All right. This is different. You've got my attention.*

"This your doing?" Jon nodded toward the waves that crashed off the still-glowing power ring-created walls.

She looked confused. "My name's Harbinger. We need you."

"So do they." People scrambled out of the Victoria mall running toward hopeful safety. "I think they need me more."

"Unless you come with me they're all going to die."

His temper flared and he focused his thoughts. *Should his ring rip her apart unless she stops the floods?*

"We've come to help you," she said, perhaps realizing his concerns. "We're the only hope this world has."

"We?"

"Please, Jon Stewart. You have to believe me."

She knew his real name. How?

"Your world isn't the only one in danger. Even your masters on Oa will perish unless we stop the murderer."

She knows about the Guardians. That wasn't possible. But then, why couldn't he contact them? What's happened to them?

"If you're behind this..."

"The multiverse is on the verge of destruction. Help us, Green Lantern, to help you"

He glanced back at the Sydney harbor. The waters were retreating. "All right. But if you try anything...."

Before he finished his threat, they had already disappeared.

Eleven

I entered a huge, circular steel-walled chamber. There were dozens of rows of view screens set into pre-fab niches approximately three meters above my head, each focused on different worlds and, as I quickly noted, different universes.

The Monitor sat at a computer panel beneath one of the screens and adjusted its image. "Earth-3," he said, but to who? It couldn't be me. He didn't know I was even there.

Red skies covered a planet already deep into the crisis. I saw the white wall of antimatter edge its way across a city. It was erasing buildings and people as if they were unneeded pencil drawings.

I was sick. I wanted to throw up, to scream or to react somehow, but all I could do was watch.

A man who reminded me of Superman flew at the white wall. The Monitor focused the view screen on him. "Ultraman," he said as if anticipating my question. "Earth-3 is ruled by super-villains, but today they're fighting to save their world."

Was he talking to me?

Ultraman hefted a truck and threw it at the encroaching whiteness as if he thought that would be enough to slow it down. The truck quietly disappeared inside, swallowed whole. He then aimed his heat vision at the wall, also to no effect.

He tried to freeze it with a blast of arctic breath but it continued pushing forward. It wasn't going to stop, not for Ultraman, and I feared, when the time came, not for Superman, either.

Finally, Ultraman shrugged his shoulders and flew at it, turning himself into his own weapon, valiantly and foolishly thinking he could fight whatever it was from inside.

I couldn't turn from the view screen as he entered the whiteness and was gone.

Another man jet past the relentless wall of white. Costumed in blue and red, he flew with miniature jet packs strapped to his back—was he another super-villain? He was tall, lanky and bald but sported a close-cropped red beard.

"Alexander Luthor," the Monitor said as he again adjusted the screen. We followed him as he flew home.

His wife was sitting up in their bed—she looked like the Lois Lane of my Earth. She was holding a newborn boy close to her as if afraid to let him go. Her smile was warm as she mouthed a kiss to Luthor. He lay down next to her, taking the baby and gently patting his cheek. All he said was, "It's time."

I'd seen the baby before, during my time in the speed force. He was slightly older then and his body equally divided between areas of matter and antimatter. I'd been taught that was a scientific impossibility but physics couldn't negate what I saw. But here, in his father's arms, the baby was normal.

When will he change?

"You can save him?" his wife asked. She was afraid but trying hard to hide her fear. Luthor nodded. "The voice told me how. And judging from what I've seen, we don't have a choice."

He heard voices? Were those the same voices I had heard in the speed force?

Luthor finally relaxed as his arm wrapped around Lois. He looked at her, smiling the same smile I know I must have when I see Iris getting dressed every morning, preparing for work.

She turned over to him and with a soft laugh traced his lips with her finger. "And the rest of us...?" She didn't need to complete her question.

She took the boy from Luthor; they didn't have much time left, but as she held her family as tightly and as closely to her as she could, she knew it had to be enough.

I tried to understand what I saw in the speed force, but the Monitor's voice startled me back to reality.

"Events are already in motion," he said, "And I know Lyla is going to kill me."

He knew he's going to die? He leaned into his chair and sighed. "My death is necessary, required, actually. Just as to save the multiverse I need the child."

The Monitor kept staring at the screen. "I need him brought to me," he said as he turned back to his work.

That was when everything went black again.

Lois Lane Earth—2

When she first met Clark, Lois took an instant dislike to him. He was handsome, no doubt. Well built, in that tractor-pulling naïve farm boy kind of way. She fully expected his hair was normally tussled and topped with a distracting cow-lick instead of plastered down and parted with hair cream.

And, she thought, he always stood at her desk, hunched over like Quasimodo, his eyes darting right and left to avoid direct contact with hers as he wheezed streams of apologies instead of defending his position as a real man would.

Lois Lane thought he may have been built like Clark Gable but Clark Kent acted like a timid version of the Cowardly Lion of Oz. He'd never do, she was sure.

And with that first impression she dismissed him from her life.

What an idiot I was, she thought now, as she watched the real man beneath the crumpled shirts and stammering manner accept another award from the ever-grateful citizens of Metropolis. She watched from the back of the crowd, and though he smiled and waved at the people applauding him, only she knew how ill at ease he actually was.

Despite all his incredible deeds, despite the world leaders he met and the distant planets to which he had traveled, he remained shy, never comfortable with acclaim, preferring not to have the spotlight of attention shone on him. He didn't see any need to be thanked for doing what needed to be done.

She ran her fingers over her wedding ring. He had given it to her forty-seven years ago, on Valentine's Day—he was always that sweetly corny. On that day she didn't pause to think before she slipped it on her finger. Lois had fallen in love with his stumbling and stammering years before.

If you were only paying attention to all his myriad distractions, you could be forgiven for believing that Clark Kent was a clown. But once you looked into his eyes, once you saw the man beneath the pretend tics and twitches, you saw such innate goodness that, even against her wishes, he kept forcing his way back into her thoughts.

She saw him glance in her direction and give an almost imperceptible, nod. He had to get away from the crowds. He loved these people, but if he had to listen to even one more comparison between him and the Gods who strode Mount Olympus—why did they always have to use that inappropriate comparison?—he was sure his head would explode.

Time and again he complained to Lois about being nearly invulnerable; there was very little that could harm him, so there was hardly any risk doing what he did. The real heroes, he always said, were the ones who put their lives on the line, the ones who had the most to lose.

He was Superman, yet he looked up to the policemen who protected the city and the firemen who risked everything to do their jobs. They were the ones who should be getting the awards, not him.

Lois walked across the square to the Planet building and took the elevator to the roof. She sat and waited. In less than a minute, Superman would thank everyone who came, say he was touched by this latest honor—and he truly was—and then he'd fly up and away, only to circle back unseen to land next to her.

"I was feeling claustrophobic again," he said.

Lois started. She hadn't heard him land, but then, even after all these years, she rarely ever did.

"You know how long I've been waiting?" She smiled warmly at him. "You sure took your sweet time, Clark."

"You know me," he replied. "Always goofing off. So, how was I?"

She kissed him. "You were great. They loved you. C'mon. Let's see it."

He handed her his newest medal. "What do you think they'll do when I tell them I'm retiring?"

Lois slipped the medal in her purse, to be put into the current volume of her scrapbook that night. "Maybe you should just send them an e-mail. 'It's been nice, but I'm outta here. Love, the S-man.' Hell, it'd be easier than the alternative."

He laughed. "How to destroy a lifetime reputation in twenty-five words or less. But I sort of like it." He was still chuckling.

"You deserve it. Fifty years saving the world from itself, I'd say that's long enough. Besides, there are all the others now who will pick up the slack. I want to spend some time with you while I can."

His smile faded. He was obviously getting older. His powers were still remarkable, but they had diminished somewhat over the last ten years. Superman had no idea how long he was expected to live. He wasn't an earthman, after all, and there was nobody who could tell him what the lifespan of a Kryptonian should be. And how much of him was super and how much was just a man?

But Lois was nearly seventy. With God's graces and good health, she might live another ten or twenty years, so it wasn't asking a lot for her to want to spend them uninterrupted with the man she loved.

"I'll tell them next week like I promised. But I want to tell the Justice Society first. They deserve it." He looked at her lips, curled suspiciously. "I promise, hon. Next Thursday. Noon."

She hugged him. "I love you, Kal-L of Krypton."

"Superman." The voice was little more than a whisper. "We need you."

Harbinger floated some five feet above them. Lois saw no anger in this strange woman's eyes, only desperation, which made what she said even more chilling.

"Earth-2 is doomed," she began, "Along with all the remaining worlds of the multiverse."

Lois checked her out. "And who are you?" Before she went into semi-retirement, Lois had been a reporter for more than thirty-five years. Old habits, as they say, die hard. "We're supposed to believe you *why*? What's supposed to be causing this? Can it be stopped?"

"I have proof, Mrs. Kent, but it is for your husband's eyes only. He and others must meet the Monitor. He will explain what has to be done."

"Others?" It was Superman's turn to ask a question.

Lois wasn't satisfied. "Who's the Monitor? What's his connection to this?"

Harbinger hovered in front of Lois. "Please, time is running short. You have to trust us." She turned to Superman. "At least listen to what the Monitor has to say."

Superman took Lois' hand. He could feel her pulse quicken. She didn't like not having answers. "I'll be all right," he said, hoping to comfort her.

Lois smiled weakly. "Promise?"

She'd been through this sort of thing so many times before, but this one felt different. Ignore your reporter's instincts, she told herself. Your husband is Superman. Nothing's ever been able to harm him. Nothing ever will.

Lois took his right hand, brought it to her face, and let it gently hold her before lowering it to her lips for a sweet, slow kiss. "I love you," she whispered. He held onto her hand as long as he could. "Too," he said.

There was a shudder in the air as he rose to the sky, Harbinger at his side. He glanced back at Lois, touched his lips with a single finger then held it out to her. She held up hers in response. Twenty yards separated them but she could still feel his warmth.

And then he was gone.

When she was certain she could no longer see him, Lois got into the elevator and rode it down to the thirty-third floor. There were friends still working here she could visit with for a few moments.

Then she would talk to Clark's assistant editor, barely out of kindergarten before she retired, to pitch him a possible feature story idea.

After that she might call Lucy or Lana to join her for dinner at Fabrocini's. She would then head home and watch some television before finally, along about one or two in the morning, falling asleep.

Thursday. Noon. It couldn't come too soon.

Twelve

I thought the Monitor was sending me to Earth-3 to search for the baby, but when my eyes opened again I found myself in Gotham City.

Fine with me, I thought. I was still undecided if I'd bring the baby back to him. Events were moving too quickly, even for a man who can run faster than light. I needed time to think.

I was with my wife one moment, and the next I was inside some nebulous universe populated with people I couldn't see who claimed to be the souls of super-speedsters past. Whatever that meant. That wasn't exactly something that happened to me every day.

Then, in another blink, I was on a satellite somewhere in space being told that I (who as far as I knew—how do I phrase this delicately?—was dead!) was the only hope the multiverse had. No pressure there.

If I hadn't witnessed the destruction of Earth-D, I'd write it all off as some maniac's elaborate hoax, but I had seen the people die. I watched that Earth being destroyed. And now, the same wall of antimatter that consumed Earth-D was beginning its sweep across my world.

Whatever was happening was anything but a joke.

Iris would tell me to trust my instincts, and my instincts said though the Monitor may be hiding something, he wasn't responsible for what happened. So, if I was going to trust myself, it seemed as if I had to trust the Monitor.

There's a unique look and smell to Gotham you can never forget, especially if most of your life was spent making your way through the relatively unpolluted and unobstructed Midwestern vistas of Central City.

Immense skyscrapers clawed their way to the clouds as if in search of a last remaining gulp of fresh air. They were guarded by monsters, too, ever

watchful gargoyles expertly carved into the granite... but were they put there to protect the city from invaders, or from its own citizens?

I never enjoyed visiting Gotham and always wondered why its people stayed. Long ago, Batman had given me an answer but I was hesitant to believe it then. Gotham, he said, was a city built from the shadows of past evils and those who insisted on living there had deeply rooted shadows of their own.

I wanted to believe better of the people, but with each visit I made, I feared he may have been right.

The Monitor sent me to Gotham, which I assumed meant he wanted me to find Batman.

I checked Bruce Wayne's estate first, but his major domo, Alfred Pennyworth, was alone tending the house. I should have thought of that. It was night, the time when Batman prowled the streets.

We became friends, if one could ever be his friend, a year or so after the League was formed. I don't think it was because I was a fellow JLA-er since he only spoke directly to a few of us there.

I actually think we got close because Barry Allen was, essentially, a policeman, which set me apart from some of the others. Hal was a test pilot, Ray a teacher, Arthur the king of Atlantis, and Diana, when she didn't fly with the gods, was in the military. But Batman accepted Hawkman and J'onn J'onzz, both aliens like Superman. J'onn was from Mars and Hawkman came from Thanagar, but on their worlds they, too, were policemen.

I think Batman saw us as more dedicated to the cause, fighting crime in all our myriad uniforms.

Uniforms. Most of us donned them because our alter egos had inhuman powers and we needed a way to separate that part of our lives from our basic humanity. But I always wondered why a relatively normal man made the same choice.

Bruce Wayne had no special powers. He was incredibly well trained but still completely human. If he only believed in stopping criminals, he could have become a policeman, or, if he distrusted bureaucracy, a private detective or even a legal bounty hunter.

I'd be tempted to ask what prompts a normal, unpowered man to don a skin-tight costume and fight crime, but with Batman I wasn't sure "normal" fit.

Some people thought Batman was obsessive, perhaps even borderline insane. I never did.

He had created an identity that could certainly give that impression, but I always believed it was a deliberate tactical decision and not a revealing personality disorder.

Batman's mystique depended on him not being predictable. If you were a criminal, one of those madmen Gotham seemed to breed on a daily basis, you could never be sure what he was going to do next, which in his mind kept his opponents off kilter, giving him the edge.

Obsessed, perhaps. Obsessive, no.

I've certainly never known a more focused man. My life was partially about doing the work I loved but mostly about being with my wife, my family and my friends.

But Batman had systematically dismantled his real self. To the world, Bruce Wayne was little more than a loutish playboy. That allowed him to go move about without being noticed or taken seriously. His real self had become Batman; Bruce Wayne, the person he was born as, had become the mask.

I knew he'd been accused of being insane, but an insane man would do anything to achieve his goals and I knew Batman had limits. Strange as he obviously was, I'd never known him to actually cross the line.

He walks it, bends it, pushes, prods and stretches it as much as he can, but he follows the law. The cases he creates against his enemies were always perfectly documented and almost never tossed out of the courts.

Batman may look and act like he'd throw an uncooperative enemy out a skyscraper window and laugh as he watched him fall to his death, but that was just his act, designed to instill fear, created to cast doubt and carefully formed to keep his foes off their guard.

His is not the way I preferred to live my life, but his act, frightening as it may be, worked in Gotham City.

Thirteen

It was three in the morning when I raced through streets still jammed with cars and pedestrians. It was as if Gotham only came alive at night.

I found Batman in the downtown financial district pursuing the Joker, truly a madman if ever there was one, white-faced, green-haired, his face chemically contorted in a rigor-twisted fire-engine red-lipped grin. He was a psychotic killer who delighted in providing numinous riddles to his insane crimes, all designed to taunt Batman with his plans without fully revealing them.

But Batman's single-focused mind sorted through the distracting assortment of puzzles and rebuses and almost always pin-pointed the Joker's schemes.

He'd obviously been at it again.

The Joker was running. A slim, frail man, he resorted to physical violence only when his victims were firmly restrained.

I raced ahead of Batman and tried to drive the Joker to the ground, but instead I fell through him and came to a stop one second later but several miles away.

Use your brain, Barry. Remember what you are.

I made it back just as a Batarang slammed into the clown, knocking him to the ground.

"Tell him."

At first I thought the voice was Batman demanding information from his foe, but it was a woman speaking. To me. "Tell him about the crisis."

She was one of the voices from the speed force. I looked for her but, of course, she wasn't there. "I'm a ghost. He won't hear me."

"You will be heard," she said. "You will be seen."

"Dammit, he can't see me," I yelled.

She didn't respond. I was getting fed up and, if just to prove her wrong, shouted, "Help me. For God's sake, someone, anyone, please, help me.

Batman's head turned toward me. "Flash?"

He could see me? How? The Joker saw me, too. "No fair, speedster. Your town's Central City. Tell him, Batman. Tell him he has no jurisdiction here."

I reached out to touch Batman, but my hand went through him. I was out of time. Batman had to know what was happening. He had to tell the League.

I called to him again. "... the world... it's dying... save us... save us "

That was all I had time for before everything went black again.

Harbinger Earth-1

The shadow was closing in.

Lyla knew the warriors were spread out across the multiverse, living in different time periods, on different worlds, even different universes. But wherever they came from, the fourteen Harbingers would bring them all back to the Monitor's satellite.

Three of her replicates were dispatched to Earth-2. There they would recruit Superman and Obsidian, living in its present era, and Firebrand, who fought during World War II.

Green Lantern, Cyborg, King Solovar of Gorilla City, Firestorm and Geo-Force, the Markovian crown prince with the power to manipulate geological forces all came from Lyla's own world, Earth-1. The winged tracker, Dawnstar, a member of the Legion of Super-Heroes, lived in that world's future, while the Atlantean sorcerer, Arion, was in its distant past.

She assumed there would also be no problem recruiting the Blue Beetle, Earth-4's sole representative.

Because their powers were also needed, the Monitor included so-called villains in his first recruitment: Psimon, Killer Frost, Dr. Polaris, and Psycho Pirate all came from Earth-1. Lyla knew these four would probably be suspicious and most likely uncooperative, but unlike the heroes, they would not be offered any choice.

As her different selves moved through time and space, Lyla thought about the Monitor, for so many years the only sentient presence in her life.

"What do you think of me?" she timidly asked him. He was hunched over his computer, entering the new data he was collecting. He stopped for a second, then continued his work.

She was an infant when he found her alone and near death, and he raised her as if he was her father, even as he trained her for the undertaking to come.

As Lyla grew up, they would often sit together at night in the observation tower, slowly eating their dinner while gazing at the stars. He'd point to one small dot almost overwhelmed by the vast cluster of lights that surrounded it, and he would tell her of some incredible adventure he had had there many millions of years before. His stories thrilled and excited her.

But then, with his next breath, he'd suddenly yell that she was failing her training. "All life is at stake," he'd shout. "Lyla, you have to take this seriously."

"Do you love me?" she asked again. "You rescued me. You raised me. You clothed and fed me and you certainly cared for me, but do you love me?"

He continued working his way through the ever-changing calculations. "We're in this together, Lyla. It's always been that way." His voice was never warm, although somehow it was always reassuring.

"I know. But why can't you tell me what I mean to you?"

"Uncountable lives depend on us."

"That's it, then? I just work with you?"

Their talks always went that way. She would complain and he'd ignore her. But this time he turned away from the computer.

For a long time he stared past her as if he was wondering: what do I say? How should I turn her down? Don't ask me questions. Can't you see I'm busy?

Then his eyes refocused, looking into hers.

"My life... is you, Lyla." His voice grew quiet. She had never heard him talk to her as if she were anything but an object to teach or a tool to use. "Everything I am, every hope I have, is wrapped up in you."

"Then you do love me?"

His face softened, not exactly into a smile, but the closest to one she had seen on him for a long time. He brushed his finger along her cheek then removed it as if suddenly embarrassed.

"Of course. What is there not to love?"

He's dismissing me. Telling me what I want to hear.

"Please... the truth..."

His computer *pinged*, requesting data entry. He turned back to his work.

As the Monitor expected, Superman-2 joined them with no fuss. Green Lantern wasn't sure but once he heard Superman was already on board, he went without further questions. Cyborg was suspicious but also agreed to join the others. Solovar said yes as well.

The Monitor was right to have her recruit Superman first.

The villains, much to her surprise, didn't protest. Perhaps they thought she was one of them, enlisting them for some nefarious scheme. Lyla didn't care. She had already recruited ten of her fifteen targets.

Firestorm was struggling with Killer Frost on the streets of Washington, D.C. She had encased half the Capitol building in ice before he found her. The Monitor also recognized that Frost was insane and would never willingly help them. At least not as she was.

Lyla let their battle continue as she searched Earth-1 for the Psycho Pirate. Once she recruited him, she would have him use his emotion-controlling powers to take control of Frost. Instead of trying to destroy Firestorm, she would suddenly find herself falling in love with him.

The Monitor could use a little Psycho Pirate in him.

Three more warriors joined the Monitor's battle.

Only one remained: the sorcerer, Arion.

And the shadow moved closer.

The civilization of Atlantis had reached its pinnacle more than forty-five thousand years ago when the arts of science and magic were so completely entwined as to be indivisible.

Hidden in the mists that blanketed the northern sea, far from any other port and beyond the reach of almost all sea craft, Atlantis flourished.

In the beginning, their solitude let them avoid the struggles that plagued mankind. But with each passing millennia their own differences, barely noticed at first, festered into hatred which slowly matured into violence. The war lasted ten thousand years before the terrible news forced the rival factions to reluctantly settle their differences.

Atlantis, they discovered, was sinking into the ocean. Despite their hatred for each other, they had to work together to prevent their own destruction.

The shadow saw her arcing toward the distant ice cliffs to the north of the island. Arion would be there, questioning himself as always, seeking quiet solace in the beauty of the encroaching floes he struggled to stem.

The ice would encase his home before the century was gone, then drag it down into the deep where it would be lost forever.

All Arion wanted was to give Atlantis a few more decades to learn how to save itself, although he feared it never would. So he fought alone, continuing a struggle he knew he was bound to lose.

The shadow followed Harbinger as she flew, buoyed along the wind currents, golden-maned and garbed in royal blue. Ahead of her, but still miles away, it saw Arion. It knew it had to claim her before she reached her target.

It swept in low, flying just behind her. In another instant this Harbinger would be his, body and mind. And when, on the Monitor's satellite, she and her unwitting replicates remerged into one, they would all be infected.

And its master would be pleased.

Harbinger turned, sensing its approach. "I was wondering when you'd show," she said. Energy beams burst from her hand and struck it just beneath what should have been its head. "Die," she screamed.

But it didn't. Instead, it closed the gap between them, as if her attack had only strengthened it.

Lyla felt a moment of panic but then quickly regrouped. "If they attack, don't fight them," the Monitor warned her. "Return home immediately."

I can't. Arion is so close. I'll get him first.

She concentrated and picked up speed. Arion was less than a mile away now. "I can do this," she kept telling herself.

He was beyond the next flow. *Don't waste time talking to him. Take his hand and get out of here. Explanations can wait.*

She put on another burst of speed, but it was already too late.

The darkness crept into her mouth and through her nostrils. It bore into her ears and forced its way under her eyes, merging again as it pierced her brain and took control of her body.

There was no fighting it. She surrendered to its power and now belonged to its master. He would use her to finish his work.

But first, Harbinger needed to bring Arion to the satellite. She needed to merge with the others. Then she would blithely smile as the Monitor explained the oncoming crisis to his new warriors. She would stay at his side as he dispatched them across the multiverse.

No one would ever know of her quiet treachery.

But once the warriors went off on their missions, once the Monitor was alone with her, only then, in a single, swift and surprising stroke, would Harbinger kill the man she loved.

From a great distance, the master watched Harbinger take Arion's hand.
An instant later they were gone.

The end of the multiverse was drawing closer.

Fourteen

I was no longer in Gotham City but I wasn't sent to Earth-3, either. Ping. And. Pong. I was on the Monitor's satellite, in a narrow, curving corridor that took me to its circular hub, the intersection for more than a dozen other similar passageways. I heard a familiar voice, but because of the curved chamber it could have come from God knows anywhere.

I listened as Cyborg, of the Teen Titans spoke, and I ran in the direction of his voice. Wally had introduced me to Vic Stone about a year ago, just after the Titans formed.

The man had a ready laugh which surprised me, considering how he became a half-man, half-robot super-hero. My "*origin* " merely knocked me unconscious for about ten minutes. His body had been nearly completely destroyed in a terrible accident. Only the armor his father built for him kept him alive.

I also heard Jon Stewart, the new Green Lantern. I didn't know him well, but because of my friendship with Hal, I'd always hoped we'd become friends. But now, being dead and all, I was pretty sure that wasn't going to happen.

I quickly recognized Solovar's voice. I had visited Gorilla City to seek his counsel more than a dozen times. He was an ape, but he was also one of my closest friends.

I knew to some the very idea of a talking monkey was humorous, if not impossible to believe. But Solovar was nothing to laugh at.

I found his city, lost in the African mountains and hidden from sight by holographic distractions, when I was summoned there years before to help him stop Grodd, a renegade gorilla. Their advanced civilization startled me but I was further humbled when I realized its apes, looking not unlike their

savage cousins, were at least two steps beyond humans on the evolutionary scale.

We humans believed we were the supreme intelligence on this planet, but, as usual, we were wrong. Perhaps, if *homosapiens* ever learned to control its anger toward our fellow man, we could evolve as they had. But in our need to be right, in our desire to be the most powerful, our endless wars have prevented us from reaching that potential.

With the exception of Grodd, the apes of Gorilla City had been devoting their lives to peaceful pursuits while we humans were still hunting mastodons with pointed sticks.

I saw a wall ahead of me. Dead end. I circled back and tried corridor number eight. The voices grew louder again.

Harbinger was successful and had brought the heroes here to the satellite. I needed to find a way to speak to them as I did with Batman, to let them know what I had seen.

It turned out eight was golden. I found myself in the Monitor's huge telecommunications chamber.

They were here, the heroes, my friends, and I recognized many of them, but not all. Some must have come from eras or Earths with which I was not familiar.

But based on the ones I did know, well, stick a star on the Monitor's chest; this was not a bad selection.

"Anyone have any idea what this is about?" Superman-2 asked as he scanned the satellite with his X-Ray vision. "Where's the Monitor? Why isn't he here?"

"Don't give a damn about him." Dr. Polaris growled. "Never would've come if I knew you idiots were going to be here."

I wasn't surprised when I saw some of our enemies since the Monitor had told Lyla he needed them as well as the heroes. Well, I thought, this is going to prove interesting.

Psimon was a matter-former, able to alter atoms and molecules with his mind. He barely looked human; his skull had been removed and his pulsing brain was clearly visible through a translucent cover.

Psimon had fought the Teen Titans several times and Wally told me he came with a built-in sneer and an oversized ego that, unfortunately, was backed up with terrible power. It was likely that he'd help us save the Earth—it was his world, too—but I also wouldn't be surprised if somewhere down the line he changed sides. Psimon was about power, not loyalty.

Dr. Polaris controlled magnetism and was one of Green Lantern's more dangerous enemies. He was the embodiment of one of those things I never could understand about so many of our foes: if he had thought about it, he could have made more money *selling* his services than he ever was able to steal as a criminal.

Killer Frost's name defined her ice-wielding abilities. I'd seen her in action twice, and she was nuttier than a bowl of pistachios. But she was standing there all smiles and gooey eyes, her arm tightly around Firestorm. Every few seconds she'd nuzzle him or give him a quick kiss as she rubbed close. As beautiful as she was, he was clearly uncomfortable. I couldn't blame him. Rule number three: never date anyone crazier than you.

The Psycho Pirate stood behind her. His Medusa mask let him control emotions, forcing his targets to do whatever he commanded. He kept staring at her and I finally understood her altered demeanor.

The other criminals were dangerous, perhaps even insane, but I was more worried about the Pirate. He was the one I saw in the speed force, debris all around him as he held my empty costume. Did he kill me? And why was Wally with him?

I ran to Superman-2, older than the Superman of my Earth, and not nearly as powerful. But to all us relative newbies, he was the one who'd seen and done it all.

I grabbed his arms and struggled to concentrate. I wanted to appear in front of him, if only for a second. But my hands went through his and his eyes were fixed far beyond mine, looking for the Monitor.

I shouted to him. "Dammit. Hear me. See me."

He didn't and he couldn't.

Just then, a solid wall of blackness moved into the satellite. The dark mass shimmered then separated into a multitude of individual segments.

The Monitor's satellite was being attacked by an army of shadows.

Fifteen

They moved too quickly to count.

Cyborg ran at them, ramming his sonic blaster onto the end of his robotic arm. "It's a trap." He fired a piercing blast of white sound into the shadows. His mouth dropped when he saw it had no effect on them.

The shadows slid down from the ceiling and seeped up through the floor and walls. Nothing was stopping them.

I rushed them, knowing anything I did would be fruitless, but how could the Flash, of all people, stand still?

I ran through three of them without even a tingle to indicate contact.

Why the hell was I here? To see my friends fail? To watch my world and my universe die?

There had to be more to it than that. I had to believe if the Monitor, or the speed force voices, had the power to keep me here, there was a reason.

I'm used to running fast. But now I had to remember patience. I needed to figure out my purpose, then, when I understood it, and could do something about it, I needed to be ready to pounce.

Pouncing was good. It's what I did best.

But I stood back and watched the others and tried not to feel as useless as I knew I was.

The new Green Lantern was already in action. "Let's see what my power ring can do." I wasn't hopeful but I admired his determination.

His ring glowed and a green beam of light flashed from it, forming into a long sharp spike that slashed at the nearest shadow like Norman Bates' knife through that flimsy shower curtain. But it went through the shadow as if it wasn't there. Janet Leigh should have been so lucky.

I wondered why, if the heroes couldn't touch the shadows, how could the shadows hurt them?

The damn thing must've read my mind.

The shadow whirled, its arm—if that's what its appendage could be called—slammed Lantern, and knocked him across the room, into the far wall. Jon's ring flashed again, and created a thick cushion for him to fall into. It still had to hurt.

"Everyone out of my way." Superman dove at five of the shadows clustered in a group. He attacked with his heat vision but the beams passed harmlessly through them.

"They're shifting between being corporeal and intangible," Superman shouted.

He punched one, his fist connecting with air, not flesh. It twisted itself, driving its fist into the Kryptonian's jaw. Superman tumbled back, righted himself in mid-air, then kicked off the far wall and cannoned at it again.

Superman was unstoppable.

"Keep hitting," he shouted. "We have to connect with them while they're solid."

Too late. The shadow had already turned ethereal again.

When Superman fails you know you're in trouble.

Two shadows pulled at Solovar. I saw the pain on his face as his fur burned at their touch. I ran, leaping at him, moving inside him.

For an instant my anger gave substance to my ghostly body. I felt different, the way I had when Batman saw me.

I existed again. For however long it might last, I was substantial and real.

I forced my control over his massive arms and thrust them at the shadow.

Solovar must have sensed me trying to take control. "They're inside me," he shouted. "Get them out." He struggled, trying to exorcise the unwanted presence, thinking it was the shadows, having no way of knowing it was me.

But I wasn't letting go. I slammed his arms into them again. For an instant we merged. The connection lasted only a second, but that was long enough. The shadows felt me burning them. Turnabout and all that. It felt good.

They screamed and pulled back, releasing Solovar. He fell to the ground unconscious, and I was thrown from him, no longer in control.

Once again I was a ghost.

I tried to run into Firestorm, to take him over in the same way. His nuclear based powers were potentially the strongest of all the heroes present. *Put me in control of that power and these shadows will be toast.*

But I fell through him, too, unable to touch or affect him.

It was my anger and horror at what was being done to my friend that had let me become... *real*. I was still angry but I couldn't duplicate the intensity of that moment.

Dawnstar, Blue Beetle, and Cyborg worked as a team. The Legionaire glided, wings pressed behind her, over the shadows. She attacked from above while Cyborg fired white sound at it. Blue Beetle, human and without power, kept a safe distance while blasting them with his more conventional weapons.

Why had the Monitor brought him here, I wondered. Why didn't he bring the Superman from Earth-1 as well as his Earth-2 counterpart? Why this insane mix and match of abilities instead of recruiting only the most powerful?

Whatever the Monitor's reasons, it didn't matter now. The heroes, and even some of our enemies, struggled with the shadows, but they couldn't slow them down, much less stop them.

I saw one of the heroes I didn't know—I think someone called him Obsideon—begin to change form. He turned himself into a living shadow. All right! He was obviously not from Earth-1 or I would have at least heard of him—but shadow against shadow, way to go, man.

He leaped at one of the shadows and toppled it.

We finally had a way in.

Obsideon hit it again, smashing the shadow against the wall. He kept hitting it and the shadow seemed to scream in pain.

Three other shadows surrounded him. He shook wildly, spasming out of control. What were they doing to him?

Superman-2 tried to pull the shadows away from Obsideon, but he still couldn't touch them.

"Turn solid," he yelled. "Don't stay in shadow form."

Suddenly, time seemed to slow to a mind-numbing crawl.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Everything: Superman, Obsideon, the shadows, the whole damn satellite, was frozen in one single moment, then another and another.

Then, just like that, time stopped.

Sixteen

A second ago the Psycho Pirate was shaking with fear, but now his spittle hung still in mid-air.
Cyborg's white sound blaster went silent.

One of the shadows had its arm raised to plunge into Geo-Force's heart. Were time progressing normally it would kill him in the next instant.

But time had stopped.

Except the Pirate's spittle dripped microscopically downward.

The shadows hand moved undetectably closer toward Geo-Force.

Superman's fist imperceptibly moved closer to its target.

Time hadn't stopped; it slowed down.

I knew that was impossible. Time couldn't change.

But I could.

I panicked. My vision was normally so speeded up I had to concentrate to maintain a balanced rate of vibration. That was the only way the world appeared to me as if it were moving at normal speed.

I had to regain control.

I ran, circling the satellite a thousand times a nanosecond. On my six hundredth plus turn, I remembered Geo-Force. If time caught up to me I'd be too late to help him.

On my eleven hundredth cycle, I grabbed him and moved his time-immobilized body out of the shadow's path. It took almost another sixteen hundredjogs to release him, far away from the danger.

Five nanoseconds had passed. Five thousand circuits. I was in my element and regaining control.

I watched as Obsideon's body changed from shadow to flesh and blood. As soon as his leg solidified, I saw Superman yank him safely away from his tormentors.

The world was speeding up again.

Another three nanoseconds passed. My brain stopped racing. My vision was adjusting.

I was still running when the shadows turned on Superman to seek revenge for stealing Obsideon from them. Superman may no longer be the young man who saved Metropolis from innumerable disasters, but he was still the greatest hero his world ever knew. He pulled himself free and rocketed away from harm.

I slowed down. The heroes were moving at nearly normal speeds. I had regained control.

I stopped running when I noticed what our old foes were doing.

Psimon altered the air around one of the shadows, turning it to chlorine to poison it. But the shadows didn't need to breathe.

Dr. Polaris used his magnetic powers to wrench free some of the room's support beams. He aimed his steel missiles at a cluster of Shadows only to watch them disappear inside.

Killer Frost froze the air around one of the shadows, attempting to seal it in ice. The shadow easily slipped through her trap. It swat her back and sent her sprawling across the chamber.

The Monitor's heroes were failing.

A shadow leaped at Superman-2 and forced its way into his mouth. "I need help," Superman rasped, hammering at it, but it pushed its way deeper inside him.

The shadows attacked the other heroes as well. None of them remotely as strong as Superman. It would only take seconds before their skin began to burn, and less than a minute before most of them would be dead.

As my eyes swept the room, I noticed one of the windows, its cover firmly in place.

I felt like an idiot.

The window cover automatically closed when sensors detected the satellite was turned toward the sun. Without an atmosphere to filter the sun's light, it would burn through nearly anything.

Light. Shadows withered in the light.

I saw Superman begin to weaken. Even he could die. I ran to the wall and, forcing my anger to its extreme, pulled at the cover.

I raged. My fist went through the metal a hundred times, but I knew I couldn't stop.

I kept hitting the wall. Faster and harder. I saw Superman collapse, his skin blistered.

I felt the steel mash against my knuckles.

I was solid.

Only for a second.

That was time enough for me.

I pulled at the cover, ripping it off. Light streamed into the room. I ran to the next window to slide its cover off as well.

As I reached for that window I knew it was already too late. I was a ghost again.

But light filled the room with a blazing intensity. Outside the satellite, in the distance, I saw a small star, its blinding nimbus burned through the shadows like a pitchfork of hellfire.

The shadows screamed. The light, the pure, unfiltered starlight, was burning them.

They fled, disappearing into light, vanishing to only God knows where. Maybe I should be ashamed for thinking it, but I hoped it was to hell.

Superman and the others settled down.

"What was that?" Geo-Force asked to no one in particular.

"Thank God." Dr. Polaris was catching his breath, his eyes still wide and fearful as if he had seen true evil for the first time in his miserable life. Good for him. Maybe, when this was over, if it ever was, he'd change his tune.

Cyborg was at Obsideon's side, helping him to his feet. "You okay, man?"

"Been better." Obsideon smiled weakly as he took Cyborg's hand.

"Same here. Yeah," Cyborg's left leg, what little of it could be seen between the steel bands bracing his still-human thigh, was bleeding.

Firebrand kneeled at his side. "Don't scream. There's gonna be some pain." She ran her hand over his leg, cauterizing his wound. "There shouldn't be any infection." In her civilian identity, Danette Reilly was a nurse.

"Good." The voice was soft but still broke through the confused murmur. "They won't be coming back. I'm sorry for the delay."

They turned to see him enter the room.

"But thank you all for coming."

Blue Beetle, standing next to Firestorm and Killer Frost, pushed his way to the front. "Yeah, yeah, blah, blah." I had never met the Beetle before but

it was obvious patience wasn't his long suit. "Screw the thank yous, pal. Where exactly is here, and, even more important, who the hell are you?" he demanded.

Monitor nodded. "Of course. Information and introductions before the assignments. Where are you? You're on my satellite, located in a dimension that exists between all others. And before you ask, no, that's not to prevent you from escaping."

He looked at the Beetle. "That was going to be your next question, wasn't it? It's for reasons of safety. As for who I am..."

He paused, more of a showman than I imagined he'd be.

"I am the Monitor," he said. "And I brought you here to save the multiverse."

Wonder Woman Earth—1

Diana wasn't looking forward to going home.

Her plane, transparent from the outside, but clearly visible within, streaked across the Atlantic at a nearly impossible mach-7. Themyscira, as always hidden behind Athena's mists, was still another half hour away, but Diana's stomach was already churning with worry.

For several years relations between her and her mother, Hippolyta, had been strained. They had barely spoken at all for almost eight long months.

The problem was, Diana thought, the same as always. She had left home against her mother's wishes. She had gone to America, which represented today the ultimate in Man's power as had Greece so long ago. And, as Wonder Woman, she vowed to protect the Amazon's enemies from harm.

But, Diana believed, this was no longer the old world. Ancient hatreds, long since outdated, had to die.

Hippolyta and the Amazons fled Greece because they had been tormented and ravaged by men. They founded Themyscira as a haven for women. Their civilization grew and prospered because, they believed, they remained apart.

Diana was not born in Man's world, but in that paradise, a being fashioned from primal clay and given life by the breath of the Gods themselves. She was born never knowing the cruelty and bigotry her mother and sisters had suffered at the hands of hateful and lustful savages.

Free from oppression, she was trained to believe in the goodness of the soul and the kindness of the heart. She was taught Amazon history but was unable to accept that man could, by nature alone, be so cruel.

"We will never associate with the outside world again," her mother had drummed into her since childhood. "Man is evil and whether they kill themselves one-on-one in anger or by the thousands in their endless stupid wars, makes no difference to us."

"But mother," Diana always asked, "weren't Amazons once warriors, too? What if man learned to better themselves as we have?"

Hippolyta scoffed at that idea. "Man will never learn. That is why we are better off being alone."

But Diana never believed it.

She knew her mother once loved a demigod named Heracles, but she never learned what had happened between them.

When Diana spoke to her Amazon sisters, she discovered that they, too, had freely given their hearts to men. Indeed, some of them left Themyscira to be with their loves. Though a handful eventually returned in tears, begging their sisters' forgiveness, many raised large and happy families.

Diana vowed to learn the truth for herself.

Fate intervened when a man crashed his airplane near the Amazon's island. He was injured and unconscious, and though Hippolyta was content to let him die—the better to preserve their secret—the others convinced her he should be returned to his kind for treatment. Men may be tyrants, but Amazons had to show mercy.

A contest was held to see who would take him back to his world. Hippolyta was crushed when Diana won that right.

Man's world was not what Diana expected. She hoped they might have achieved the same kind of peace the Amazons enjoyed, but their world was filled with hatred, anger, and violence.

But Diana also saw the compassion the doctors showed the unconscious pilot and their other patients.

She saw men working peacefully alongside women. She saw them laughing together and taking care of their children together.

When she first met the fledgling Justice League of America, at that time six men with great and potentially fearsome powers, Diana finally understood that though this was not nearly a perfect world, her mother was very wrong about the heart of man.

Diana's plane penetrated Athena's mists. Themyscira lay below, but home was not an inviting sight. Hippolyta had turned her back on Diana

when told she was not only going to stay in Man's world, but would use all her powers to fight at their side.

Although Diana was later welcomed back by her sisters and her *unofficial situation* officially sanctioned—Wonder Woman would be the Amazon's informal ambassador to the outside world—Hippolyta showed her little warmth or love.

And now I come begging for her help, Diana thought. But the world's in danger. How can she turn me down?

She was very afraid of the answer.

Seventeen

The Monitor walked with slow, faltering steps, physically weaker than he'd been when I last saw him, but the fiery blaze in his eyes was still burning strong. There was nothing majestic about his presence, but the heroes and villains both sensed a humbling inner power.

Lyla helped him to a chair. Before he acknowledged the others, they huddled together, speaking in whispers. I rushed over and hunkered at their side, eavesdropping. So I'm rude. Sue me.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this now. You need to rest."

The Monitor answered with a hoarse laugh. "I don't have any choice. As my health fails, he grows stronger."

He? Who was he talking about?

His face, white and drained of life, sagged with tiredness. Lyla offered him water but he waved it aside. "Can I get you anything? Can I do anything?"

He gently shook his head. "Stay with me. I'll need Harbinger's powers if some of them prove difficult."

She took a seat next to him.

The others were growing impatient waiting for him to explain himself and tell them what he expected them to do.

Superman was the first to sense the unrest. "Alright, quiet down," he said. They did as he turned back to the Monitor. "We're starting to get unexplained weather on my Earth. Blue Beetle says it's happening on his Earth, too." He looked around the room. "Anyone else?"

Jon Stewart interrupted. "I tried to contact the Guardians, but my signal is being blocked. Most of you know that to affect my ring, whatever is out there has got to be pretty big and very bad."

Superman brought their attention back to him. "So something's happening not only to the universe, but to the multiverse." Superman turned back to the Monitor, "Let's hear him out. If he's telling the truth, we're being given a chance to save our worlds. If he's lying," he turned back to the others, "we'll know what to do then, too."

He then turned to our foes, obviously uncomfortable standing next to us, their former enemies. "We'll give him the benefit of the doubt, won't we?" Superman wasn't asking.

Superman accepted their silence as acquiescence. "Monitor, it's your show now."

Eighteen

The Monitor sat up in his chair, slowly drawing on whatever strength he could muster. His face tightened and his eyes focused.

"In the past fifteen hundred hours, more than nineteen thousand universes have been destroyed. That translates to more than a hundred million populated worlds. Earth-3, and its universe, ceased to exist less than two hours ago. As usual, there were no survivors."

"Impossible." Superman shook his head in disbelief. "Earth-3's populated with our super-villain equivalents. They're as powerful as any of us."

Psycho Pirate laughed. "My kinda guys. Toothless, couthless, and ruthless."

"Pirate, shut the hell up." Cyborg shot a look that instantly quieted him. "Their world's gone, man. You want to be next?"

The Monitor continued. "The threat is a wave of antimatter that moves between universes. But before the wave appears, your planets experience devastating climactic shifts followed by crimson skies."

Some of the heroes who had already encountered the changing weather suddenly paid closer attention. He continued. "Beyond inexplicable weather patterns, there will be seismic disturbances that will rip apart major land masses. Your coastlines will be crushed by mile high waves. Only the very tops of your tallest skyscrapers will be seen above the new water levels."

"And the bad news is...?" Psycho Pirate laughed. Psimon glared at him and an airtight bubble formed around the Pirate's head. "You were told to shut up, idiot." The Pirate gasped for breath and fell to his knees.

Superman-2 was at his side in less than a second. "Psimon, release him. Now." Psimon smiled and the bubble dissipated, leaving the Pirate gulping for air and gasped, "I'll kill you for that." Psimon smiled in response.

"Monitor, continue. I trust there won't be any further interference." Psimon glared at the Pirate, his hands rubbing at his throat, soothing it.

"I hope not. We haven't time for delays. The antimatter wall is the last of the plagues. It will simultaneously exist in different time periods and make a coordinated sweep across your planets. Everything it engulfs is instantly erased from existence. To date there has only been one survivor, a young baby from Earth-3."

Cyborg interrupted. "I thought you said they all died."

"He was removed before his planet was destroyed. Should events worsen, his special abilities will prove useful."

"But that brings me to why you are here."

We all listened, even the Psycho Pirate, our attentions now undivided.

"Where I am linked to positive matter, our enemy wields the forces of antimatter. As he destroys each positive matter universe, and his energies fill the resulting vacuum, I become weaker. Soon, I will be too frail to help when you will most need me."

"So why didn't you seek us out earlier?" asked Solovar, suspicious. "And why did you choose us? My power is limited. The Beetle has none to speak of."

I saw Blue Beetle perk up. "Hey! You wanna compare arrest records, monkey boy? I haven't heard any complaints before."

Solovar sneered, almost forcing me to laugh. Gorilla faces can express emotions better than say, a dog, but not by much. His scoff twisted his lips making him look more like he had an upset stomach than being bothered with the Beetle. "I am discussing power levels, Beetle, not competence of intent or duty."

He turned back to the Monitor. "You chose one Superman, but why not two? Why not Wonder Woman, who possesses the power of the gods? If our universes are truly imperiled, why not bring in everyone to fight for our side?"

I could see the Psycho Pirate react, his face contorted through a series of emotions as if all the gears finally clicked into place. "Hey, good point, hairy. Why didn't I think of that?"

Firebrand laughed. "Maybe it's 'cause you're a moron. But yeah, Monitor, what the ape said. Why us?"

The Monitor's eyes closed as his head silently sagged into his shoulders. Harbinger kneeled, supporting him. I could see she was in love with him, and at this moment I wasn't sure she knew she was going to kill him.

"He chose you because the enemy can't be stopped in a single action." Her voice was cold and angry. "He's been watching all of you for a long time. He knows what you can do and he told me your specific powers are what's needed for phase one of his plans. But if that fails..."

Her voice trailed as she tried to contain her anger. "For God's sake, why are you questioning him? Don't you realize he's the only one who can save you?"

"Lyla, don't," the Monitor said weakly. "They have a right to their suspicions."

He slowly turned back to the others. "Lyla is right," he said. "This battle will be conducted in different phases, depending on the different results."

Superman wasn't sure. "And you think we can stop him? Us or the others down the line?"

"You have to, Superman. What is at stake now is greater than mere good or bad. Literally, we are fighting for the fate of all life."

The Monitor paused, his eyes lost as if trying to remember where he was. Suddenly, his head rolled back. I tried to grab him but my hands went through him.

But then he stirred again. "Forgive me. I fear another universe has just been extinguished. So many more lives are now gone." He turned to Lyla, his eyes half closed but still hopeful. "Tell them. Please."

He closed his eyes again and his arms dropped to his side. His breathing was slow and shallow, but he was alive.

"The Monitor placed certain machines in five crucial eras. His hope is that when the attacks commenced, the machines will be powerful enough to stem the antimatter."

"And we fit in, how?" Cyborg asked.

"Our enemy will send his shadows to destroy the machines. You must protect them at all costs and then, on our command, activate them."

Firestorm flew across the room, a trail of flame burned the air around him. He paused in mid-air, hovering before the unconscious Monitor. "That's it? He brought us here so we could be glorified security guards?"

"Do you intend to help us, Firestorm? Or perhaps you'd rather see all life come to an end?"

Blue Beetle laughed. "A. Choose answer A, you idiot."

Firestorm looked like the rest of us, mature and enormously powerful, but I knew he was actually a teenager controlling a manifested adult body. His bluster gone, he backed away and joined the others. "Yeah. Well. Okay."

The Beetle looked almost disappointed. "Okay, Lyla, Harbinger, or whatever you said your name is, exactly where are you sending us?"

Her eyes flashed a brilliant golden light. "See for yourself, Blue Beetle."

A yellowish glow surrounded them, and when it dissipated a moment later, they were gone.

But I was still here.

Lyla kneeled before the Monitor, tenderly holding his hand. "Rest now," she said. "Conserve your strength."

Her eyes narrowed, and the look of love I saw in them disappeared instantly, replaced with a cold, angry glare.

This was the Harbinger who was going to betray the man she loved.

Psycho Pirate Earth—1

Pirate." This was a voice he never heard before.

The Psycho Pirate was used to hearing voices. They called to him in the most inopportune times, asking him questions he didn't want to answer, interfering with his day as he planned his next crime, interrupting his sleep when he most needed peace and quiet.

Why were they always telling him what he was supposed to do? Why didn't they just shut up? Why didn't they leave him the hell alone?

"Go away."

"Pirate."

They never listened to him.

"I said leave me alone. Stop bothering me."

The voices always wanted something. Scare him. Make her cry. That child needs to suffer. That girl needs to be afraid. Don't allow him to stop laughing until he dies.

He never wanted the voices inside him. But the only way he could ever have any peace was to do what they demanded.

Make him angry. Make her sad. Happy. Envious. Lustful. Fearful. Greedy. Vengeful. Control their emotions. Make them do what we want them to do or you will suffer forever.

"Pirate."

The new voice was back. He tried to ignore it.

"I can give you peace."

"You can shut the hell up, that's what you can do."

"You don't want to be on this satellite."

"Like that's news."

"Let me bring you to me."

"Get out of my head and go to hell. You're not real anyway."

He cupped his ears and shook his head hard as he could. Sometimes that would drive the voices away for a few minutes. Of peace. Of quiet. Of glorious loneliness.

"The Medusa mask has driven you crazy. It controls you. But come to me. Help me and I will free you from its spell."

The Pirate lowered his hands as he looked around him. Nobody was there, but then nobody ever was when he heard the voices.

"You know about the mask?"

"Agree to help me, Roger, and I will free you from its curse."

"No more voices?"

"Never again. You will be free."

Free? Could it be true? And even if it wasn't, what did he have to lose? How much worse could it get?

"All right, take me. I'm yours," he said. "Happy now?"

The voice didn't answer. The Psycho Pirate laughed. It was always the same. The voices always wanted something from him. Oh, well. What will it be next time?

But his body suddenly felt cold. His skin began to pull away. He screamed in pain.

And he disappeared.

"Very happy," The voice said.

Nineteen

My first thought was to go with my friends, to help them in whatever way I could, but I stayed behind, perhaps realizing whatever Lyla was going to do would happen very soon.

"Is something wrong?" The Monitor's voice was weak, but loud enough to interrupt her concentration. "You seem distracted."

She kept her back to him, but I could see the struggle in her eyes. She was fighting to resist whatever was taking her over.

I shouted, for all the good it would do. "C'mon, Lyla, don't give in. You can fight it. Concentrate, Lyla. Concentrate!"

I kept hoping I'd get angry enough, or anxious enough, that I would take on a physical presence as I did with Batman and Solovar. But whatever happened then wasn't working now.

She stared at the far door, focusing on a single rivet welded into the metal frame. Something kept her staring at that one special spot. "Just thinking," she said, her voice cold and emotionless. "Our enemy has great power. We can slow his progress, but do you really believe we can stop him?"

"Would you prefer we give up?" The Monitor asked.

"Just wondering if resisting him is a futile effort. Maybe we'd be better off expending our energies elsewhere."

"Care to elaborate?"

She circled the room, picking up objects here, putting them down there, but always carefully avoiding looking at him.

"Perhaps whatever he's creating in the void will be better than what currently exists."

"He's creating death, Lyla, not birth. And he's destroying, not building. How could that be better?"

He knew she was going to kill him. Why didn't he stop her? Even weak as he was, I knew he had the power.

"I'm not saying it is. But every world I've traveled to on your behalf was pretty much out of control even before the antimatter came. Their people always hated each other. Usually they were even trying to kill each other. Maybe we should give them their wish and start the whole thing over again."

"That's not his intent. You know that."

"I'm afraid I no longer know what I know."

She started to leave. "Lyla." She stopped, waiting to hear what he had to say, but not turning to him.

"A favor, please. Look in on the baby for me. I'll just be a minute."

"Of course, Monitor. Whatever you want."

If I could have I would have grabbed him and shook him until he explained to me why he wasn't stopping her. Perhaps I needed to find a way to do it myself.

His voice called out to me as I headed out of the room. "We all have our parts to play. Mine will soon be over." He walked in front of me and stared directly into my eyes. "Others," he began again, "have their jobs to do, too. Let them proceed."

He sat down again. His eyes closed and before I could move, he was asleep.

So now what, I wondered. If he was talking to me, was I supposed to sit back and let Lyla kill him like she was a jigsaw puzzle and his death was the final piece that would complete the picture?

But what if he meant that I had to do my job and stop Lyla for him?

Lousy bunch of questions.

Wish I had even a single answer.

Twenty

I knew I could watch the Monitor sleep in his chair, which was my second most favorite thing in the world to do—my first being everything else in the world! Or I could follow Harbinger.

Drying paint. Potential violence. A super hero's life is filled with these kinds of hard choices.

She stood in the room and stared at the child. I witnessed this same scene before, from inside the speed force. As before, the boy was half flesh and half anti-matter. If what I saw was really the future and not some manufactured event, the Monitor would enter at any moment.

Harbinger reached for the child. He was looking at her, wondering who she was and if she was going to hurt him. He had aged from the newborn they rescued just hours before into a very frightened three year old. I wondered if he had any memories of his home on Earth-3, or the mother and father who saved him as their planet disappeared.

"I don't know why he brought you here," she said to him. "There are things he still keeps from me. But you must be important."

She looked out a portal to the unblemished blackness beyond.

"Well, whatever he's planned, it won't be allowed to happen. My master will fight him. And we're going to defeat him."

Lyla stopped. She shook her head, rocking it from side to side, trying, I'd like to think, to take back control. It was, unfortunately, all too obvious that she couldn't.

She took the boy's hand and held it between hers. "The Monitor, you know, saved me when I was a baby, about the same age you are now. I don't remember how I got there, but I was alone, lost in the ocean, floating on

a piece of wreckage. He told me he looked everywhere, but no boats had sunk and no planes had crashed. We never learned how I got there or who I originally was."

She smiled at him. "We're not unlike, are we? Both of us were lost. Both were found. And both of us were obviously changed from whatever God originally meant for us to be."

She stopped again and started to cry. "Did you know I'm supposed to kill him? Why doesn't he stop me? Why can't he kill me instead? He doesn't deserve to die."

I could see the change as the darkness again took hold. The tears were gone and when she turned back to the boy, her eyes were dead. Emotionless.

"You know he sent his heroes to protect his oh-so important machines. A useless gesture at best, I'm afraid. You see, once I kill him it won't matter what those devices do. All hope for the multiverse will die with him."

She leaned in closely to the boy, and his eyes widened in fear.

"My master will have me bring you to him. But it will be all right," Harbinger whispered. "He won't hurt you."

"*He*? Who won't hurt him?" I asked. But of course she didn't hear me. Lyla panicked as the Monitor entered the room.

Twenty-One

The Monitor walked past the boy, barely paying him any attention. Instead, he smiled at Lyla as if she was the most important thing in his life. Damn him. "Can't you see she's changed? Protect yourself." I knew he didn't hear me, but yelling at him made me feel better.

He sat down in front of the boy. "How is he?" the Monitor asked. "Still disoriented from his journey?"

Lyla gave him a fake smile. "A little afraid. I was telling him about you, promising you wouldn't hurt him."

It was so damn obvious to me. How could the Monitor not realize she was lying?

"Look at him, Lyla. He has no idea the role he's about to play." He turned to her and she was surprised at how drawn his face had suddenly become. He looked tired. *No problem, old man. You'll have plenty of time for sleep soon.*

"But how are you?" he asked her. "I've been worried. You never separated into so many replicates before."

She laughed and for just an instant she was Lyla again. "I'm tired. But fine."

"Anyone give you trouble?"

Her smile was genuine. "A little. I thought the villains were going to be difficult, but once they understood their lives were at stake they were almost more willing to join us than some of the heroes."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. A few of the heroes were suspicious. They thought we were new villains or someone trying to dupe them into doing I can't imagine what. Firestorm was the worst. He's like a kid, ready to argue about anything."

The Monitor laughed. "He may inhabit an older body, but he is young. Still, they're now off on their assignments. I think we picked well."

He slowly forced himself to his feet and circled the boy, his open palms glowing slightly as if examining him.

"Matter and antimatter existing together. You know that's supposed to be impossible. In fact, it not only should tear him apart, but us and everything else as well."

"Then how did it happen?"

"He's some kind of bridge, a natural stabilizing agent between incompatible energies. I also believe he will turn out to be crucial in our upcoming struggles."

He turned to her suddenly.

"You're sure you're all right?"

He startled her. "I'm fine. Thank you."

"I sense conflict. Lyla, you should know whatever decisions you make will be right."

"Don't worry about me." She nervously stepped away from him. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm waiting. For the inevitable."

I could feel the mood in the room abruptly change. Lyla was no longer smiling. Before my eyes she had become the Harbinger again.

"You know I have to do this," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I can't help myself."

He didn't respond.

"He's controlling me."

The Monitor kneeled before the boy, his fingers hovered just above the line of demarcation between flesh and antimatter.

"That's his way, Lyla. You should know that. But it's all right. I don't think anyone could resist him."

"Don't call me that. Don't call me Lyla. He doesn't like that name. I'm Harbinger. You know I don't want to hurt you."

This was the same conversation I heard in the speed force.

"Stop me, Monitor. Please. Stop me." She was in tears, begging for his help.

But the Monitor looked in my direction instead. His voice dropped to a whisper. "The enemy is powerful. His plans for destruction need to be understood."

Once again the blackness swallowed me.

I was back in the speed force, running faster than before.

But this time I sped up my internal vibrations and ran a path counter to the forces pushing me. I realized I didn't have to be cast wherever the cosmic tides haphazardly sent me. If I concentrated, I could control my journey.

In the speed force, time and place were one. I could go where and even *when* I wanted.

My universe was dying and I knew exactly where I wanted to be.

With Iris.

At her side.

Twenty-two

As I sped through the shifting mists, images of my life rushing past, all I thought about was how beautiful she was, how important to me she'd always been and how much I needed her now.

I had to know if Iris was still alive. And though I accepted the odds were that even if I found her I couldn't talk to her or touch her or even let her know I was just a breath away, I didn't care. Seeing her would be enough. After that, I knew I could concentrate on the task at hand and figure out how a dead man could possibly help the living.

Iris was so deep in my thoughts even the very end of existence took second place.

I felt sorry for some of my other friends; Bruce never let anyone close. Diana, Clark, Ray and Hal had people they cared for but never anyone they fully shared their lives with. Of all my friends, only Carter and Shayera, Hawkman and Hawkwoman, could possibly understand how Iris was the only one who kept me sane when all I sometimes wanted to do was explode with frustration.

I saw the Earth, but which one was I looking at? Earth-2, Earth-29, Earth eleven billion? I had to find Earth-1, my Earth. My home.

Then, suddenly, it was there, undetectably different from the other Earths, but I still knew it was my planet. It was my time period.

My life was just a step away.

The Earth was blanketed in a red haze. In the southern Guangshou province of China, just above Hong Kong, I watched a tornado rip through a fairly modern city, crushing it to flesh and stone rubble. I saw England slip

quietly into the sea and tidal waves wash across South America, drowning Brazil under a mile-thick mattress of frigid water.

The white wall of antimatter swept over Africa, eliminating it from existence. It moved across Europe, erasing whatever it touched, leaving behind only the black emptiness of undemanding space.

I had to run faster. I had to make it to America.

I had to find Iris.

Twenty-three

I ran across the ocean so fast there was no time for me to break its surface; I was literally running on water.

I glanced back as the wall of antimatter narrowed the already slender gap between us. The ocean disappeared in its wake, but I didn't care.

The wall was behind me, but America was dead ahead.

Iris.

I had to keep her in my thoughts.

I had to let the speed force take me to her.

I had to see if she was still alive.

I had to know if she could still be saved.

I had to tell her, even if she never heard me, how much I loved her.

Closer.

Was she there? Please, God, let her be alive.

Iris.

Then, suddenly, a wave of—*what? Energy? The shadows? Something else I couldn't see?*—struck. It knocked me back into the antimatter. But I was already dead. How could it kill me again?

I burst free from the wall, and continued toward the U.S. To where I last saw Iris.

The energy struck again, knocking me back a second time and then a third.

In the next seventeen seconds I tried a hundred more times to get past it, but whatever it was, wouldn't let me proceed. It wouldn't let me see Iris.

I kept trying. I kept running.

Until I couldn't.

Until I fell to my knees.

Until I could do nothing but surrender.

I called out to God. I was angrier at him than I'd ever been before.

"Damn you. I just want to see her one more time."

Then the Earth disappeared.

Or, actually, I disappeared.

Taken God knows where.

I didn't want to go. I wanted to try another hundred times to find her. Or a thousand times, or a million if that was what it took.

But I wasn't allowed to.

I was in blackness, floating in a sea of ink, pulled by forces I couldn't see in a direction I couldn't control.

And I didn't care.

I was floating in the darkness. Without a point of reference there was no way to determine where I was or where I was going.

Darkness.

Blackness.

An angry infinity of nothingness.

Then I saw it.

It was cold, gray. I had no idea how far away it was. Behind it I saw a shimmer of green.

I was running.

But when did I start?

The gray was still very far away. It stretched toward the ball of green. The green turned out to be a planet.

Wherever I was, I wasn't alone.

I was closer now. The gray looked like a castle floating in the black. *Was that even possible?* But there was scale now and for the castle to be seen against that world—barely a pinprick itself in the distance—it would have to be immense. As large as a moon.

Suddenly, I was afraid. I knew what I was hurtling toward.

This was the fortress of the enemy, the one who was destroying the multiverse, the one who was destroying my world.

The one who might have already killed Iris.

Then I smiled.

I had found my foe.

Twenty-four

I was inside the enemy's home. I'd seen it before but I had never run through its oppressive stone corridors. So I did as I always do in any new surroundings; I began a superspeed reconnaissance to get the lay of the land.

I was looking for the torture room. I knew he'd be there. It was his favorite place in the castle.

As I ran past seemingly endless stone courtyards, the smallest still larger than any football field, I thought about the speed force.

I wondered if it had always been there, just beyond my sight and reach. Had it somehow been guiding me all these years? Was it responsible for that single, errant bolt of lightning that changed not only my life but the life of everyone I knew? And most of all, I wondered why I hadn't discovered it until now?

Its portal into all times and places would have been invaluable. Imagine how many disasters I could have prevented if I were able to move through time. Why did it take my death for me to literally stumble across it?

I thought of Wally. When this crisis was over, if it ever was, I promised myself to make sure he learned about it. If someone alive wielded its energies there would be no place or time he couldn't go.

Or destroy, if its knowledge fell into the wrong hands.

But I'd known Wally since he was nine. He was cocky and hot-headed for certain, but when I fought alongside him I knew he had the stuff to be a much greater influence on the world than I would ever be.

The castle walls were thick, dark gray stone. I ran past more courtyards crowded with deadly weapons wondering if one of them was the device that killed me or would do so soon again.

I heard voices and ran for them.

"He'll kill me, Flash. I know he will."

Someone was talking to me.

"He's only kept me alive because he needs me to manipulate them. But Flash, I failed him. When he finds that out he'll kill me. I failed him when he needed me the most."

I recognized the Psycho Pirate's voice and my stomach suddenly fell.

He was gibbering like a baby. "Here I am, the master of emotion. Want someone to be happy? Bam! He's grinning ear to ear. Want him to laugh himself to death? Almost too easy. Need him to be so paranoid he kills himself? Flashy, I don't even have to break a sweat for that one."

I found the Pirate on his knees, staring at the floor and still prattling his nonsense.

"I can create any emotion in anyone, Flash. But look at me. I'm petrified."

Then I glanced up and saw the all too familiar figure I knew in my heart was waiting for me. His eyes were closed and he was hanging unconscious in a small steel chamber built into the stone. Energy beams of some sort held him in place so he couldn't move.

I hadn't just run through space, I had gone back in time. Not centuries or years, but a matter of hours or perhaps days.

I was staring at myself, still alive, but unconscious in that box-like prison. But if I'm dead now and I was alive here, why didn't I remember any of this?

I pushed past the Pirate. "Barry," I called out to him or me or whatever we were, but he didn't seem to hear. "How did you get here? Give me a damned clue. Give me anything I can work with."

I, maybe it's he, didn't move.

When did I die?

Did I ever get back home? Did I ever see...

My other self stirred for a moment and we spoke the same word at the same time. "Iris."

We were both thinking of Iris.

Lady Quark Earth—6

Although no one knew it yet, in less than twenty eight minutes, Earth-6 would be gone.

The skies had long since turned red. Tornadoes ravaged the southern hemisphere and earthquakes sank Japan and Australia. Ice slid down across Korea, Russia, and China and swept up from Antarctica to engulf Australia, Argentina, and South Africa. There were already more than three billion not dead, but erased.

No one realized their universe was a singular anomaly. Of the untold billion worlds that were created at the moment of its birth in a primal explosion, sentient life was born to only one. The other worlds remained dead and inhospitable.

Where other Earths in other universes gave birth to long traditions of the heroic ideal, spawning untold numbers of warriors hungry to fight, and even better, die, for a common good, the hero myth never formed here.

In fact, throughout the ages only a handful of Specials—as the normals called them—ever existed. Their powers and values were passed on from generation to generation, but their numbers sadly never increased.

By the time the shadows appeared, only thirteen Specials were still alive. Within an hour, six of them died in the first attack. Four more vanished eighteen minutes later as they tried to save random innocent lives.

Lady Araythya Quark was one of the last three Specials still living. Her husband, Lord Karak Volt, and their daughter, Princess Liana, were the other two.

The royal family of Venice, Italy, traced their ancestry back more than four thousand years. Once Liana married Griyseth Sorasen, one of the

younger Specials living in the southern hemisphere, they anticipated their new combined lineage to last at least a thousand more.

But Sorasen no longer existed, wiped out of reality when the pale death swept across his ice-bound continent.

Lady Quark watched as the red sky tore itself open and released a white cloud that quickly reshaped itself into a massive wall, one mile wide by two miles tall. It swept across the Earth, eliminating everything in its path, growing even larger as it fed upon the planet's dwindling energy.

Araythya was unaware Venice was the last surviving city on Earth-6.

"Karak, what is it?" Quark, trying to control her rushing emotions, struggled to keep her voice steady. *Don't panic. Karak and I will figure this out. We always do.*

"It's nothing I've ever seen before," Volt responded as he flew above the encroaching whiteness. "But I think it's best to stay back, you and Liana. I'm not certain we have the power to stop it."

Below him a hundred people tumbled into non-existence, and the wall, still not sated, continued on.

Lady Quark watched as her husband flew at the devastating emptiness. He fired his electrical bolts into it. They were powerful enough to shatter stone. Surely, she thought, they would disperse whatever this threat was.

The wall absorbed his energy and added it to its own.

"Araythya, I can't stop it." He flew to his wife's side as Liana landed next to them."

"Then what do we do?"

Helpless, they watched as the wall continued its inexorable sweep through Venice. They didn't notice the reed-thin man in the long, green cloak appear suddenly behind them.

His mournful eyes, black and sallow, turned away from the ever-moving whiteness. He knew that nobody had ever survived its silent touch. And even if, by some impossible miracle, someone escaped, the ground beneath their feet would soon vanish, and they would find themselves alone, drifting lost in an endless and empty nothingness.

"Who are you? Did you do this?" Quark's voice came from behind him.

Pariah knew they wouldn't believe him. The last survivors never did. But, as always, he tried to explain. "Listen to me carefully. This is not my doing. I was brought here... but only to watch as your world died."

Lady Quark saw Karak powering up. A few hundred volts of electricity

would make the alien tell them what he was doing, or die painfully, if he refused.

Pariah, his eyes widening with fear, hastily drew back. "You don't understand. You mustn't touch me."

But Volt grabbed Pariah's tunic as he unleashed a powerful blast of energy. "Don't threaten me, murderer. You have no idea what I can do."

"I'm not. I wouldn't. But if you touch me...."

Volt's blast poured into Pariah. A growing, coruscating nimbus of burning fireworks crackled the air and then flared, repelling his energy, funneling it back into him.

Volt collapsed, his skin burned from his own power.

Quark rushed to her husband's side. Fighting back her tears she scooped him into her arms.

"We can fight this, Karak, I know we can. But I need you at my side."

Volt wasn't looking at his wife, the woman he fell in love with twenty years before. As two of the very few Specials, it was inevitable that they would marry, but to be in love with each other was completely unexpected.

"Araythya," he started to say, but then grew silent.

Lady Quark realized Volt was staring past her. She turned to see their daughter, Liana, attack the green-cloaked stranger.

Thorny roots erupted from the ground and slashed at Pariah. Liana ordered them to gouge out chunks of his skin and bone and to rip him in half. Instead, they withered as they touched him and fell dead to the ground.

"What is wrong with you? Why won't you die?"

"Don't you understand," he cried out. "I can't be killed. I can't ever die. But I swear on your gods and mine, I'm not responsible for what's destroying your planet. I only want to help you."

"You lie. I'll kill you."

A pointed tree branch weaved its way toward Liana and lifted her off the ground. Riding astride it, she pointed it at Pariah. *Let's see you survive impalement.*

Pariah called to her. "It's behind you, girl. Turn away."

Lady Quark saw the antimatter wall move swiftly at her daughter. She heard Pariah warning her away. *Why is he trying to save her?*

Liana felt a sudden overwhelming chill. She turned to see the whiteness surround her. It was so clear and pure it was almost beautiful. For an instant she laughed before understanding she was lost in the silent death.

"No!" screamed Lady Quark as her daughter disappeared. She was

ready to plunge into the wall after her and somehow rescue Liana if such a thing was even possible, but Lord Volt held her back.

"Don't. It's too late," he said.

She tried to pull free, but Volt held her firm. He turned to the stranger. "If you're innocent of this terrible malevolence, then save my wife."

Lady Quark resisted. "No. we belong together. I won't let you...." But Volt released his grip on her and flew away suddenly.

The whiteness was ahead of him. With a scream of defiance, he plunged into its heart.

"I love you," he said as he ceased to be.

Lady Quark fell to her knees, at once wishing to destroy the evil rushing toward her, but also praying it would take her to wherever her husband and daughter were now.

"Do it," she shouted. Her hands urged it closer. "Take me, damn you. Take me as I explode inside you. Take me and kill me even as I kill you."

She felt an arm circle her waist and heft her to her feet. Pariah's voice was calm and soothing. "It can't be destroyed. Not that way. Your only hope is to come with me."

"No. Let me die. Let me be with my family."

He could feel the wall's cool touch on his face and wished he could let it take him, too. But he knew the wall would simply pass over him and when it was gone, he'd still be alive.

As the whiteness surrounded them, Pariah held onto her. This was a fruitless effort. She would stay here and die while he moved on to the next destruction. But, as always, he had to try.

Quark struggled, and called for Karak to save her and shouted to tell Liana how much she was loved.

The white wall moved past. In less than a minute, Earth-6 and its universe was gone.

But Pariah and Lady Quark had already disappeared.
And there were still more worlds left to die.

Twenty-five

I was staring at my other self, the me I was and will be again, separated only by an accident of time; a heavenly before and after. I kept wondering, despite all logic, if there was any way to prevent my death.

The Pirate stared at the prisoner me. His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Tell me, Flash, you think maybe he died in that explosion?"

What explosion?

"I mean, it was big enough to kill her. Maybe it killed him, too?"

Her? Who was she? Who died?

"I can allow myself hope, can't I? Hah. *Hope*. Another emotion. Trouble is, I'm filled with emotions I can't get rid of. Doubt. That's a good one. Worry. Fear. Dread. All wonderful." He ranted to my other self as if I would suddenly jump down from my prison perch and help him. Yeah, like that was going to happen.

"Oh, and I'm so anxious I feel like a billion spiders are crawling all over me, spinning webs out of my back hairs. You got any idea how that feels?" He had me there. I didn't even want to begin to think about that.

"But you know what really sucks the silver spoon, Flash?"

I'm sure he didn't expect me to answer.

"I'm a damned victim of my own emotions and I'm living in terror that they're going to kill me. So that's why I came here, Flash. I want to deal with you."

I shouted at my other self. *C'mon. Living Flash, this is your chance. Take it. Work with him. Say something.*

But my other self, eyes shut tight, still didn't move.

"I want to fight him, but I can't. He's too powerful. Flash, can I be honest with you? He scares the crap out of me."

"Oh, dammit, dammit. Why am I always so afraid? Why did I ever say yes to him?" He screamed and scratched his face until long rivulets of blood flooded down his cheeks.

"Why do you think I do whatever the hell it is I do? I need other people's emotions because, God help me, my own are—you don't want to know what my emotions are."

He suddenly stopped and I realized why.

The enemy had returned.

Twenty-six

At nine feet tall he towered over both the Pirate and me, and at first sight he could scare the bejesus out of Freddy Krueger. As I stared at him I knew that sudden stomach-churning nausea I felt wouldn't go away for a very long time.

His voice, rasping through a fleshless face of pale bone, was deeper, more mechanical and colder than the Monitor's. Dark blue armor covered him head to foot and the gray-metal bands that bound his legs and arms pulsed as he talked. Tubes bubbling with some kind of vomit-green liquid—*his blood? His nutrients? Something else altogether?*—protruded from his chest and funneled into sockets on both sides of his bony jaw.

"Conspiring with my enemy?" The Pirate fell to his knees, prostrating himself before his master.

"Nonono. I-I was just talking. Sizing him up. Seeing what makes him afraid. I'd never do anything to...." He groped desperately for the right words. "I'm loyal to you. Only you," he said, evidently not finding them.

The enemy's socket eyes glowed a white so deep you felt drawn into them. "As it should be," he said flatly.

He started to turn but then, as if reconsidering, glanced back at the Pirate, still on his knees. "But should you ever think otherwise... "

The Pirate suddenly screamed as blood spurt from his mouth and eyes. His flesh boiled and peeled off him like discarded carrot slices.

My God. The Pirate's face blistered a thin, runny pus.

I don't know what I was thinking, but I pounded my fists into the monster causing the Pirate's pain, trying to connect with something, anything. But, ghost that I was, I once again fell harmlessly through him.

I wasn't ready to calm down. Not yet. I ran around him, faster and faster to conjure up the same kind of tornado force for years I successfully used against my rogue's gallery. If I could touch him even for a second, if I could just distract him...

I'm not the kind who easily hates, but I had to now. It was my only chance to appear, in the flesh as it were, as I did before Batman.

"No."

The voice blasted its way through my head, disrupting my concentration. At the same time my feet slid out from under me and I fell, literally head over heels, tumbling across the room, then falling through several walls into other rooms as if they weren't there—which, for intangible me, they weren't.

Out of the corner of my eyes I saw the satellite's outer wall rushing toward me.

I tried to stop. The last thing I needed was to find myself rolling into space. I wasn't worried about dying—when you're already dead that's not a high priority—but I knew there was nothing in the frictionless void to slow me down or help me change my course.

I would spend my life tumbling through nothingness, unable to return to the satellite, the speed force, or, what I wanted most, Iris' side.

The outer wall was hurrying closer.

I screamed again, and for a single moment the colors around me shifted. I felt the floor rip my back and tear my uniform.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to realize I'd become solid again.

I didn't know how long it would last. I flipped myself over and grabbed at anything I tumbled close to that could slow me down. A chair. A table. A desk.

My hands phased in and out. One moment I was grasping a computer workstation and the next it evaporated in my grip. I was returning to my ghostly existence.

The wall was just ahead of me. There was no time to grab hold of anything else. I was going to slip through the atoms of the wall and be lost in space forever.

"Danger, Barry Allen. Danger!"

But I crashed into the wall. A solid wall.

I had somehow stopped my slide into oblivion.

Twenty-seven

I heard the Psycho Pirate's pathetic whimpering long before I re-entered the room. He was on his knees, his face still blistered, his eyes wide with fear.

Some things never change.

Despite everything he'd done, I felt sorry for him. Many of the criminals either I or my friends fought over the years were obviously out for wealth or power. The Psycho Pirate was somewhat different.

His original name was Roger Hayden. He had been a petty thief, one of millions of losers exactly like him, wasting as much of his life in prison as out.

If he had remained a common criminal the chances of our paths crossing would have been minimal if at all; the police were more than able to handle any non-powered bad guys.

Unfortunately, Hayden, the poor fool, had been given what he thought was a gift. Surprise! It's true: *There ain't no such thing as a free lunch!*

The Medusa Mask seemed harmless; little more than a Mardi Gras trinket to be tied around one's face before partying. But when Hayden put it on, the mask, actually an ancient weapon, possessed him. Possessed him in that Linda Blair, head-spinning sort of way.

The mask fed on emotions the way vampires sought out blood. Our passions were its nutrition and its appetite was insatiable. The mask forced Hayden to control emotions, and when he did, it absorbed them, replenishing and increasing its power.

The mask even absorbed Hayden's own passions, driving him, inevitably, insane while still forcing him to seek out more and greater emotions to steal.

Hayden, more than a goodly number of times, had been removed from the mask, but it always maintained a long-distance bond with him. He was, unfortunately, incurable.

Which made his plaintive cries for mercy even more tragic.

"I swear. I'll do everything you ask." Tears streamed down his face. "Just don't... God, please... stop... stop...." He curled up like a ball, his head buried between his knees, whimpering and quivering.

The enemy nodded and suddenly the Pirate's flesh was restored. "There are others I could have chosen, Pirate. The empath, Raven. The witch, Phobia. But I brought you from my enemy's ship for a reason. Do not make me regret it."

"I-I won't... I swear to God I won't. Whatever you want, I'm here for you... I swear... ."

Without replying, the enemy turned and left.

Hayden turned to my other self, still silent, still unmoving. "You saw that, right? So you know if he asks me to I'll destroy everyone on Earth for him. I'll make them so afraid of puppy dogs and pussy cats they'll slit their own throats and laugh out loud until they die."

He ranted on, filling himself with fake bravado. "I'll take on all the heroes, your Justice League friends, and turn them against each other in a mindless, jealous rage."

He nervously glanced back to the door praying the enemy hadn't changed his mind and decided to choose someone else to do his bidding. "Whatever he asks for, I'll do it. I'll do it happily. And I'll do it any way he wants."

Hayden struggled to find something else to say, but his bluster was gone. He calmed his shaking and hurried from the room, leaving my other self, and of course me, alone.

Twenty-eight

My other self groaned back to consciousness. I could see his eyes taking in the room. Checking it out, I assumed. I could tell he remembered the pain inflicted on him but quickly pushed it to the back of his mind.

His eyes—or was it my eyes—fixed as he attempted an escape. He struggled with the energy beams holding him, but the more he resisted the tighter they became. He seemed to look directly at me, but I knew that was impossible.

I reached out to help knowing, of course, there was nothing I could do. That frustrated me all over again.

Don't ask me how, but I felt something grab my hand. Involuntarily, I started to vibrate internally as I'd done many times before. My atoms would speed up and I could pass, untouched, through solid walls. I'd done it a million times before.

Now I was doing it in anger, but why? I slammed my fists into the controls that kept my other self prisoner, but, as I knew they would, they slipped through the metal with no effect.

God knows why I didn't stop. I kept hitting the controls, kept speeding up my internal vibrations, kept getting angrier and angrier at my helplessness...

I vibrated faster, pushed myself harder. I felt my body heating up and I heard me shouting to myself.... *"Don't forget this. Don't dare forget this."*

I kept hitting the machine even though I still couldn't touch it. But I wouldn't stop. *"Don't forget. Don't forget."* I shouted it over and over...

... until I vanished.

Again.

Twenty-nine

I tumbled through the speed force as fragments of history flashed past me. But not the random moments which I had, from previous experience, come to expect. History was made up of the mundane, the every day lives we all slog our way through. But I saw none of that. No people going to work, no families eating dinner, washing dishes or watching TV.

What I saw were the super-powered; the heroes, who like me, through design or accident, were made different. The voices in the speed force apparently arranged this *El-True Hollywood-style* documentary of major historical events for my eyes only.

I tumbled back through time and watched Atlantis disgorge from the sea, ocean waters cascading from its hills as it retook its position in the northern arctic. I saw a sorcerer—I'd soon learn his name was Arion—use his magic to stem the flow of ice. He'd fail and he knew that, but he wasn't going to stop trying.

The American plains appeared, a steam locomotive chugged its way •vest carrying settlers to Kansas and beyond. There were cowboys, but not 'he standard issue cattle wranglers. At some point I learned their names: Jonah Hex, Batlash, Johnny Thunder, Nighthawk.

A flash of light took me to the battlefields of World War II. Sgt. Frank Rock led his Easy Company regulars over a hill to take a Nazi encampment. I saw one of the soldiers fall—they called him "Ice Cream Soldier"—but the others continued on. Pilot Johnny Cloud and the crew of the Haunted Tank fought their own battles in the skies over Austria and on a bloodied French hillside. I saw a dog called Pooch running beside two men named Gunner and Sarge. They were working alongside Marie, a female French resistance leader, to free a Nazi-controlled village.

Why was I being shown these people? Why was I brought to these times?

I was in the future, at least I think I was. A young boy, Kamandi, I guessed no older than sixteen, dressed in a loincloth, ran through the decayed remains of what had once been a crowded city. Intelligent, talking animals dressed in khaki, armed with rifles, hunted him. This wasn't Gorilla City, so where or *when* on Earth was this taking place?

People and places strobed past me, and for all my running, I was getting nowhere.

I wanted to get back to the Monitor.

I needed to concentrate, to slow down my internal vibrations and thereby slow down my heart rate. I was the fastest man on Earth, but to remove myself from the speed force I needed to become its slowest.

I pictured the Monitor's satellite in my mind. "Take me there, guys," I said.

No answer. "C'mon, don't be shy. Can't we have another conversation? Anything new going on? See any good movies?"

Nothing. I felt ignored.

"Take me to the damn satellite," I shouted. Who I was shouting to is anyone's guess, but I thought yelling would make me feel good. Surprise! Surprise! It actually did.

I felt even better an instant later.

That was when the worm-hole opened.

BatgirlEarth—1

Kara, is it wrong to admit I'm afraid?"

Batgirl perched on the gargoyle of a high tower just north by two blocks of Gotham City Hall. In her hand was a pair of binoculars which she was using to scan the city.

The people on the streets below had, understandably, panicked. They were running in all directions, pushing their way past others in a vain attempt to get out of Gotham. "Where are they going?" Batgirl asked. "There's no place to hide."

The universe was in crisis. Running off to the suburbs wasn't going to save them.

Kara floated above her. She'd just arrived from Metropolis. "I'm pretty scared, too, Barbara," she said. "Nobody has any idea what's going on. Not even Clark."

Batgirl called Kara because she needed someone to talk to, and Supergirl was the first who came to mind. Barbara's father was Gotham police Commissioner James Gordon. A better man you'd never find, but he was focused and dedicated to his work and rarely found the time to comfort his family.

"I think the end's really coming this time," Barbara moaned.

Supergirl gave a grim laugh. "Well, those guys with the placards on the corner had to be right eventually. But don't give up on us yet." Barbara knew Kara wouldn't surrender even as she spent her final breath.

"Is there anything we can do? You're the one with powers, and you look..."

"Helpless?"

"Yeah. Sort of. I mean, if you're helpless, then what can I do?"

"We'll figure it out. I trust the Justice League."

Barbara wasn't certain. "I can't give up the idea that there's something out there that can stop whatever is happening, but I don't know if we'll find it in time."

Supergirl understood. "Being afraid's okay. You know, I spoke to Clark. First time I think I ever saw him nervous. Same with the Titans and even Green Lantern. GL says he thinks Flash may already be dead."

"Oh, God." Batgirl's face drained white. "Not him. I...."

"Yeah, I really liked him, too."

They stared at the city. Sixth Avenue stretched far into the distance below them. Soon the streets would be empty. The people would have either fled Gotham or would be hunkered together at home, loved ones facing Armageddon together.

Supergirl broke the unbearable silence. "I've heard that some of our enemies are gone, too. Never liked them, but I never wanted them dead."

Barbara laughed. "That's only because you're better than them."

"Maybe," Supergirl said. "You know, I'm really worried. But I'm not letting that stop me. You might not believe it right now, but I know you think the same way."

Barbara stared at the emptying streets. "Right now I'm not sure I was ever really cut out to play hero. It just sort of happened to me."

Supergirl scanned the city with her telescopic vision. "You know what I'm seeing now? Firemen, policemen. Soldiers. Even some civilians. They're helping each other when they could be running away, too. Nobody sets out to be a hero, Barbara. Sometimes, yeah, it just happens."

Supergirl's vision was fixed somewhere in the distance. "My God." She turned to Batgirl. "There's a light plane over Danbury. The antimatter wall... I can't stay."

A streak of red and blue suddenly cometed across the sky. Barbara watched until she disappeared. She put down her binoculars and leaned back into the tower. *Supergirl doesn't rest. She keeps trying. She keeps pushing. She's a real hero.*

"My God. What have I become?"

From somewhere below she heard the squeal of wheels followed by a sickening crunch of metal. Even before she heard the cry for help she was already on her way.

Thirty

When my vision cleared, I was back in the Monitor's telecommunications chambers. He stared at his view screens, studying the images transmitted from an ungodly number of worlds. They rushed past him at speeds impossible for any ordinary person to follow.

How many Earths was he watching at once? How was he getting signals from what seemed to be more than a thousand different eras?

On one screen I saw Wonder Girl from the Teen Titans on an apartment building rooftop tightly gripping her golden lasso which hung taut to the ground. People were beginning to shimmy down it to the ground. "Take it easy," she cautioned its frightened residents. "Slide down. I promise I won't let you fall." Below them, Gar Logan, the shape-changer Changeling, turned himself into an octopus and was catching the people as they slid past.

I saw Wonder Girl's arms straining and her knees beginning to buckle, but she held firm.

So many images. So many battles.

On another screen Firestorm, Killer Frost, and the Shining Knight fought shadow demons over medieval England. They were outnumbered, but they weren't giving up.

Wonder Woman was on Paradise Island desperately trying to raise an army of Amazon warriors.

Along the coast of ancient Newfoundland I watched a tall, proud Viking Warrior lead his men into battle against the shadows. Somehow they drove them away through sheer will alone. When the fight was over, he placed his dead on makeshift wooden barges and set them adrift in flame, a warriors' funeral.

On the planet Rann, a battalion of soldiers joined Adam Strange and his wife, Alanna. They were defending their world from still another shadow attack.

As unbelievable as it may have been, more than a thousand such scenes, from across the width and breadth of the multiverse, were seemingly playing out at once.

It is simple and perhaps convenient to think of war taking place as a single, linear progression—soldiers start at point A and fight their way to point B. It was the way war had always been fought.

But this was taking place in all times and on all fronts, orchestrated in ways unimaginable to me. The enemy thought and planned not in three dimensions but in a million and more. Every attack in every place in every time focused on a single unaltered objective: ultimate destruction.

I feared we could stop a hundred or a thousand or even ten thousand shadows but we couldn't stop them all. The enemy appeared to have an endless supply of warriors.

Where was he getting them all from?

I felt humbled and weak. The enemy was omnipresent and seemingly unstoppable. But I kept thinking civilization wasn't born to die this way.

And, perhaps there was something else.

I needed to believe there was a reason that on my death I had not simply ceased to be.

No matter what it took, I was going to find out why I was still here.

"They're fighting valiantly," the Monitor suddenly said. "But I'm afraid it won't matter." Was he talking to me?

On another screen the boy Kamandi was climbing a great golden tower. It was one of the Monitor's machines, and as out of place in that barren wasteland as a whale beached in the Sahara.

His fingers clawed at the protrusions, the intricate computer circuitry that covered every inch of the device like insane three-dimensional tattoos. He used them as pitons to pull himself higher.

Kamandi paused halfway up and gulped in fresh air. I had a feeling he'd never been this high off the ground before. The look on his face mirrored the ecstatic abandon in his heart as he stared at the horizon so far away.

I'm sure he was thinking, "So this is what my world looks like." I doubt he saw it as I did, empty and frightening in all its stark implications. He

probably didn't wonder how it got that way, either. We take so much for granted, even destruction and decay.

I watched him continue his climb, wondering aloud when the tower first appeared. "I've ridden over this area a dozen times," he said to a passing hawk. "But this was never here before." The hawk circled the tower in mocking silence.

He wasn't giving up. "Hey. You know what this thing does?" The hawk circled him three more times then flew off, still refusing to answer. Kamandi didn't seem bothered. "Yeah, I don't know either. Maybe it's the old world's science." He laughed as the hawk disappeared behind a hill. "Okay. Don't talk to me, then. Bye."

Why was I riveted to this screen? I didn't know him or his world. Why didn't I turn slightly to the right and watch Cyborg and Starfire fight the shadows in the middle of New York, or look instead at that scene in the future where the Legion of Super-Heroes of the Thirtieth century desperately tried to stop a mastodon stampede?

Maybe it had to do with the machine. Where were the heroes the Monitor sent to protect it? Where were the shadow demons who he said were intent on destroying it?

Kamandi continued up the tower. At worst from the top he'd see even more of his world. At best, well, I don't think he actually knew what the best would be. But this climb, no matter what was waiting for him, was probably a welcome diversion.

His world was savage but even the threat of constant danger could, through repetition, become mundane. Kamandi generally knew what to expect and from where the trouble would come. This tower, however, was anything but the norm.

"Who put this thing here?" he asked. "I'm pretty sure it's not from this world. Maybe not even from the past."

Very astute, Kamandi.

He could make out its top not ten feet above him. The hawk was slowly circling back. "Hi, again. Hey, tell me if there's anything good up there? I mean, if there's not, why bother going all the way? Oh yeah, you see any food?"

The bird ignored him and flew off again. Kamandi pulled himself to the tower's peak. "Fine. Get lost. Don't come back. Actually, I haven't been finding a lot of food anywhere around here lately. Stupid bird probably got to it first. Maybe it's time to move on."

I started to turn to another screen when I heard him shout. A shadow demon lunged from around the machine and Kamandi, startled, pulled back, letting go of his purchase.

He fell as the shadow demon streaked past.

More shadows emerged from behind the machine. The enemy was in motion and standing worlds and time periods away, I let out a curse because there was nothing I could do to help.

Thirty-one

I pushed closer to the view screen as the boy fell, but then, suddenly, a hand reached into the view screen's frame and grabbed his wrist. It was Superman-2.

"Hang on, lad. I've got you."

Kamandi stared at him. "Superman?"

Superman-2 was startled. "How do you know me...? Of course. You've met my Earth-1 counterpart."

"—Your... what? I don't understand."

Superman-2 laughed. "It's too confusing to explain. Maybe later. Let me put you down then rejoin the others."

"What others?"

Dawnstar winged into view alongside Superman. A moment later I saw Solovar enter the scene. Kamandi gaped at him as he scrambled back. "A gorilla? You're one of Czar Simian's killers."

'*Czar Simian?*' Exactly what kind of world did he live in?

Solovar shook his head. "No, boy. I'm not even from this time period. My name's Solovar."

Kamandi reached a hand to Solovar's face. "You are different from the others."

"Damn right I am, boy." Solovar twisted his face into a grin. It frightened Kamandi even more than Solovar's normal scowl.

Superman-2 rushed the shadows and blasted them with both his X-Ray and heat visions. One of the shadows erupted in flame as the others abruptly turned and fled.

"They're getting away," shouted Superman.

Dawnstar was already chasing them. "No Problem. I can track them wherever they go."

Superman-2 rushed in front of her, blocking her flight. "No, don't. Let them go."

"Are you crazy? We can stop them."

Solovar interrupted. "We're here to protect the machine. They want us to leave it unguarded."

Superman-2 leaned back and yawned. "The big attack hasn't come yet. Close your eyes, Dawnstar. Sleep if you can. When they come we'll need our strength."

Dawnstar shook her head. "I wish I could be so calm."

"I'm older than you, by a lot," Superman-2 laughed. "These old bones aren't what they used to be."

She smiled as she sat next to him. Solovar squatted at their side and closed his eyes as he lay on his back, his hind feet curled upward, scratching his chest. "You know, Superman, I'm older than you and Dawnstar put together and you don't hear me complaining." He sighed. "Humans are so pitifully weak."

Kamandi sat across from them, eyeing them carefully. "Will someone tell me what's going on?" he insisted.

But they were already asleep.

Thirty-two

The Monitor's eyes brightened as he turned from the view screens.
"He's coming. Maybe there is hope."
He?

The figure in green with the frightened eyes, the one I saw the first time I was in the speed force, suddenly appeared in front of us, looking dazed and confused. His eyes darted across the room, trying to acclimate himself to his new location.

"Where am I?" He noticed the view screens circling the room. "This is a space ship, isn't it? Which Earths are those?"

The Monitor rose to greet him. "Welcome, Pariah. I've been waiting for you."

Pariah?

"You know me? Who are you?"

"You're on my satellite in a limbo dimension between universes. It was built prior to the day you were cursed."

"How do you know—?"

"Who you are? What happened to you? I've been monitoring you. Which is how I also know you're usually sent from world to world just before they're destroyed. I don't envy you watching all those worlds die."

"One more time then." Pariah's fragile patience was fraying. "Who are you?"

"My name... I actually was never given one, but Lyla calls me the Monitor. I think it has to do with my obsession for observing others. And I'm responsible for your continued survival."

Pariah lunged and grabbed the Monitor. "You cursed me to watch all those people die?"

The Monitor shook off Pariah's grip. "That isn't what I said."

"I should kill you...."

"And you'd find that as frustrating as killing yourself has proven to be. I know how hard you've tried." The Monitor turned back to his view screens and gestured toward them. "Sit. Please," he said.

"You know the multiverse is dying. You've seen first hand the horrors. But do you know how this came to be? Are you even aware of the enemy?" Pariah sat silent and angry, refusing to answer.

"I'm not the one who cursed you. In your eyes, my sin, if I have one, was only in keeping you alive long enough to help counter his evil."

I watched as Pariah stared at the Monitor's machines and at my friends who had been sent to guard them. For a moment he was startled as he recognized them, but then he realized he had only met their replicates, on Earths that had long ago ceased to exist.

He turned away, certain these heroes would also die as soon as their universes were destroyed.

"If you didn't do this, who did?"

"He, too, has no name. Pariah, do you know how many universes remain?"

"What does it matter? They're not going to survive."

"Every life matters. That is why you still suffer every time you watch them die. Yes, I know that, too."

"And that's why I know nothing you do will change anything."

The Monitor turned back to the view screens. All but a very few turned black. "Only five universes remain." I saw the five Earths. The skies above them had all turned red.

"And when they're gone, will my torture end, too? If so, I wish he'd hurry it up then."

"I sincerely hope you don't believe that."

Pariah smiled, but kept staring at the view screens.

"You know the nexus of each attack is the planet Earth. The red skies and the wall of antimatter starts there, then spread out from it and across that universe, erasing everything in it from existence."

The Monitor gestured toward the screens and the multiple Earths were replaced with a single image.

"The enemy has selected the next universes to die. Red skies have already blanketed those Earths. Antimatter will soon begin its death sweep."

Pariah shrugged his shoulders. "Then there will be three. Then two. Then one. I've tried, God knows, but I can't stop it. Extinction is inevitable."

"No, it isn't. The Monitor turned and for the first time I saw fear in his eyes. "Listen to me quickly and don't interrupt. My time is almost over."

His face had suddenly become gaunt and his eyes hollow and sad.

"My machines...." He stopped. "No, I'm getting ahead of myself. The multiverse was originally one, but it was split asunder at the dawn of time. And the fabric of each universe in what had become a multiverse, was weaker than the whole it was meant to be."

"What do you mean?"

"Because the universes were weakened, his antimatter could destroy them. I've tried my best to stop him, but evil is unfettered and merciless. He is faster than I could ever be. He strikes without pattern. And, with each universe he destroys, I became weaker and less able to resist."

Pariah urged him on. "What about your machines?"

"There is no more time," the Monitor sighed. "Please, understand my fate was determined long ago. This is the only hope the multiverse has. Until all is made clear, please do not harm her."

"Her? What are you talking about?"

I heard a voice, low and distant. I had heard it before on the other satellite.

The enemy!

"All is not ready, but we must proceed. Do it now!"

"I am here," a second voice answered. I recognized it, too.

It was the voice of the angel of death.

Thirty-three

The woman standing in front of me was no longer Lyla. She was the Harbinger, and her hands glowed with the same golden fire I saw from the speed force. She was finally ready to kill.

"Monitor," she said flatly.

He acknowledged her. "I've been waiting for you, Lyla."

"No. I'm not Lyla." Her eyes blazed with hatred. "I'm Harbinger. Call me Harbinger."

The anger suddenly left her and she saw, for just a moment, the man who long ago saved her life "Please. Stop me. He's making me do this."

They talked, back and forth, word for word everything I heard before.

"Are you trying to trick me?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. That's for you to remember... after."

"What are you talking about, old man?"

In two seconds I knew he would drop his hands to his side, accepting his fate. "It's time," he said again. "Do what you must."

"I don't want to do this. Stop me, Monitor. Please. Stop me." She was in tears.

This was the future I saw. I then realized *another* me was in the room, but he existed out of my current time, beyond my sight. Still, I knew that right about now he was shouting, "Run, you idiot. She's going to kill you."

I knew he wouldn't hear me, but I saw the Monitor look to his side. I couldn't hear his whispered words, but I remembered what he had said. "It's for the best."

He smiled at her as I knew he would. "You have to do it, Lyla. I'm ready."

"I told you before. I am not Lyla. I am Harbinger!"

Her hands erupted with a burning flame that seared into him with ferocious suddenness. "I am Harbinger!!" She shouted. "Harbinger!"

I screamed—*again*—as the Monitor disintegrated before my eyes. I tried to run around him, to smother the flames by whipping up a speed-created hurricane. But my powers, all my incredible powers, were useless when I needed them most.

His flesh dissolved in patches, exposing the muscle and bone beneath. As a forensics scientist, examining more bodies than I ever want to remember, I'd seen similar horrors so many times before. I watched his heart beating even as the flames clawed their way through it.

Everything about him, his skeleton, his heart, his organs, even the smell of his burning flesh, was unbearably familiar.

As he died, this alien I met only hours ago, seemed so... human.

His skin dissolved, his skull crumbled, and his voice cracked as he whispered to me, "Protect her, Flash. This is only the beginning."

He saw me. And he spoke to me.

Harbinger's eyes widened with horror. Her anger was gone, replaced only with the realization of what she had done.

"Monitor.... Oh, God, oh, dear God."

Suddenly, she leapt from the satellite and disappeared into the void. I tried to stop her, but she was gone. The Monitor had asked me to protect her and I failed.

Terrified, I turned back to see Pariah fall to the floor. He clutched at the Monitor's smoldering corpse. "What do I do now? Monitor? Your machines. How do I activate them? Tell me. What do I do now?"

I shouted to tell him that there was nothing he could do. Just look at the screens, you idiot. The Earth—it was my Earth, Earth-1—was disappearing within a shroud of terrible whiteness. My world was dying. My universe was coming to an end.

The other screens showed another Earth. I recognized it as Earth-2. It was disappearing, too.

The Earths and their universes were being erased before my eyes.

This was the end of everything.

Earth-1 was gone.

A moment later Earth-2 joined it in oblivion.

Pariah was babbling. "This is the end of all hope," he repeated again and again.

The whiteness covered me.

But all I could think about was...

"Iris."

PART TWO

WORLDS IN LIMBO

In theory, all time exists simultaneously but to any observer it progresses linearly, events neatly unfolding in progression. But as existence itself destructed, time collapsed as if no longer having purpose.

—The Monitor Tapes Pg. 956

Psycho Pirate Earth-1

It is done. The Monitor is dead. The two prime universes are destroyed."

"You've won then," the Pirate said, forcing a laugh that wasn't there. *Appease him. Always agree with him. That way he won't kill me.*

"Congratulations, master. This is a great day, isn't it? Umm, I do have one question." Don't ask anything, you idiot. Don't spoil the mood. "Master, you promised me a world. But if you destroyed everything...."

"Silence. I have my own questions."

Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!

The Pirate stumbled back and pressed himself to the wall as his master swept past him, staring into the infinite space. "With his death my strength should have increased. With the destruction of two universes, my power should be overflowing."

He turned to his slave, gesturing with his finger, and the Pirate was quickly pulled through the air to his side. His fingers tightened around the Earthman's frail body. "Tell me, Pirate. Why aren't I all powerful?"

There was no safe answer. "Maybe it just hasn't happened yet, master. These things, maybe they need time."

He held the human close to him. "I was born the very moment he was. His power comes from positive matter, mine from antimatter. If he is Harbinger's Monitor, I am the Anti-Monitor."

"Anti-Monitor? That's your name? You never told me...."

"We have no name. We have existence. We have purpose. Mine was to eliminate positive matter. His was to maintain what was. Now he is dead. So explain to me again, Pirate, why I need to wait before his power becomes mine."

The Pirate felt the steel like fingers tighten around him, crushing his ribs, pushing the air from his lungs.

"Master, I did everything you told me to. I'm controlling the Flash, aren't I? He's not escaping us, right? Anything you want me to do, I do it. Master... please tell me what do you want me to do now?"

He pressed closer to the Pirate, then, with a snarl, he tossed him aside. The Pirate fell hard against the far wall and he wanted to cry out in pain, but clamped his mouth shut instead. *Don't say anything, you idiot. Anything could change his mind.*

"I still need the Flash. He is the only being able to transverse dimensions. And you are the only one available to me who can control him."

He watched the Pirate try to press himself into the wall. "All right. For the moment you live."

The Pirate watched him leave. "Thank God. Thank you, Jesus." He cried again as he picked himself off the floor.

"Pirate." The Master called him again.

"Join me now. There is still work that needs to be done."

With his forearm, the Pirate wiped away his tears as he staggered to the door. *Do whatever he wants. Agree with whatever he says. He's a scary little mother and he'll tear you apart as soon as let you breathe. What the hell did I let myself get mixed up with?*

He closed the door behind him.

"Damn you, Anti-Monitor. Damn you and damn me."

Thirty-four

I saw her in the whiteness. Beautiful and calm. She smiled as her hand reached for mine.

"Barry, c'mon, you doofus. Answer me. What do you think it'll be?"

I shrugged. "You want a boy or a girl? You know it doesn't make any difference to me."

She lay back into her cushion as we circled the lake. We were in the middle of a vast park far from the city and the people we knew. She took another sip of lemonade.

"We're not kids. I'm a little scared."

"I would've been more scared if I was younger. Maybe I'm ready now." I wasn't lying.

"Me, too. And you're sure you want to stay here? What about your friends?"

The Justice League seemed so far away and so long ago. "It'll be okay. If the Flash has to stop, uh, flashing, I'll have no regrets."

"You don't mean that."

"Yeah. I do. It hasn't been easy but I'm ready to stop. I don't want anything getting in our way again."

"Yeah. I love you, too."

She leaned closer with one of the happiest smiles I had ever seen. That was when we heard the explosion, muffled and distant. I tried to ignore it.

"What was that?" she asked, surprised.

"Don't know. Don't care. Someone else'll check it out." I was sure she'd believe me.

"Yeah, right. I see you chomping at the bit." Evidently, I was not a very good liar. I tried again. "That part of my life is over." I actually believed that, too.

"Not today." She squeezed my hand. "I'll be all right."

I pressed the hidden button on my ring and my Flash costume sprung out of it and unfolded in the air. An instant later I was wearing it.

I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"I'll be back soon as I can," I said as I took off toward the city.

Nothingness.

I felt the cold.

Everything had disappeared.

"Iris."

I called out her name again. This time not even my dreams answered.

Then my eyes opened.

Thirty-five

Didn't the universe just die? And didn't that white wall of anti-matter kill me a fifth, or was that a sixth time?
I appeared to be on the Monitor's satellite, but the space outside us was no longer black.

There were no planets here. No suns. No rocky fragments or even a gaseous trail marking some unknown path.

We were surrounded by an uninterrupted pure white void that was somehow more frightening than the gloomy solitary blackness of space.

If this wasn't the speed force, then where were we?

I saw Lyla sprawled on the floor, her eyes slowly blinking open. She was Lyla again and definitely not Harbinger. A long crimson dress somehow replaced her blue armor. I knew better than to ask how.

"I killed him, didn't I." She wasn't asking a question.

She was still dazed as she stood and saw Pariah kneeling beside the dead Monitor. "Tell me he's alive." She was crying, not quite understanding, or perhaps remembering exactly what she did.

"He's dead," Pariah said. "And the universe was destroyed with him. Why haven't I died yet, too?"

"Lyla."

It was the Monitor's voice. I looked at his body, but he was still dead. Then again, so was I.

Being dead isn't what it used to be.

"Monitor?" The color had drained from Lyla's face. She pulled herself away from Pariah. "Where are you?"

"Don't grieve for what you've done," he said. "You freed me. And if we win this struggle, it will be because of you."

His face was on one of the view screens and she saw him the same time I did. "Monitor?" Lyla called to him but his eyes were focused somewhere behind her, his speech obviously pre-recorded.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

His message interrupted her. "He was controlling you, Lyla. It was his hand that killed me, not yours. But still, my death was necessary if even a single universe is to be saved.

"I needed you," he said, "To kill me at the very moment I activated my machines. But my enemy's plan commenced before I found the power to trigger them."

He paused, giving us time to understand what he was talking about.

"My death released my energy and provided the machines with the power to do more than I originally planned. Lyla, my body died, but out of my essence a limbo of pure matter was born. I absorbed the universes of Earth-1 and 2 into me, into the universe I created."

"They live?" I asked. "Both worlds?" Did that mean Iris was alive?

He ignored me, but I was getting used to that. "There is still danger. Because the enemy forced my hand, the machines were not fully activated. Even though the universes are safe within me, the temporal vibrations that separate them are slowly fraying. In time, the universes will merge."

He didn't need to tell me what that meant. Two objects can't occupy the same space and time. Even before the planets came together, when they reached some sort of interdimensional roche limit, their gravities would destroy each other.

"There is still much that must be done. Listen to him. I protected him because only he can save the universe."

Was he talking about me? Nobody could see or hear me. I couldn't make myself known. How the hell could I save anything?

"Who do I listen to?" Lyla asked. "Monitor... please, tell me what I'm supposed to do."

He continued speaking. But his voice softened and he allowed himself a wistful smile. "I know you feel guilt for what you've done, but I knew when I first found you floating helpless in the sea that you would one day have to do just what you've done. I saved you to become the conduit through which I would save the universe. But Lyla you became so much more."

She was staring at the screen, trying to see him clearly through her flood of tears.

"My plan was only to train you. But in raising you, you became my child. You became part of me."

On the screen the Monitor turned to the side, nodding, as if answering someone's off-screen question. He then turned back, facing us.

"It is time. My death is close and your mission is beginning. Goodbye, Lyla, and remember, I love you."

Lyla kept staring even as the view screen went black.

"Who am I supposed to listen to, Monitor? Tell me. Please tell me."

"Me. You're all supposed to listen to me."

The voice was young. Lyla, Pariah and I turned to see him standing in the doorway.

He was tall and thin, looking no more than seventeen, and he was dressed in gold armor that covered him from foot to head, his hands included. His narrow face was framed with a thick mane of curly red hair. I was sure I'd seen him before. But where?

He smiled at Lyla. "He knew you might not believe him, and he wanted me to make sure you knew how much he loved you."

Lyla stepped toward him but he moved back, keeping just out of reach. "Please. Don't. Don't touch me," he said. "It's safer. For you."

"Who are you?" Lyla wanted to know. So did I but there was no way I'd expect him to answer me.

He smiled at her again, and that's when I realized who he was.

"We've spoken before, Lyla. I'm Alexander Luthor, formerly of Earth-3."

The last time I saw him, less than an hour ago, he had been three years old.

Thirty-six

Grinning, Alex Luthor turned to Lyla and Pariah. I don't know why, but I immediately liked him.

"You took care of me when I was first brought to the satellite. Of course, I was only a week old then." Luthor's green eyes sparkled, waiting for a reaction.

Lyla stared at him, her head tilting as if to joggle loose a stray memory. "The baby?" She shook her head. "You can't be the baby."

He laughed as he sat down. "Is there any milk here? The Monitor does have a refrigerator, doesn't he?" A panel slid open on the wall to my right revealing a glass of milk. "Computer programming. Excellent," he said, retrieving his drink. "Maybe some cookies, too?"

Lyla started to approach him but he held his free hand out. "No, don't. It's not a good idea to touch me. We need to do some tests first." He drank his milk then set it aside. "Except for my head, half my body is positive matter and the other half is antimatter. Generally a lethal combination."

A hologram of him as a baby appeared in his hand. It rotated to show his positive and negative sides. "Somehow, don't ask me how or why, they exist together. I know. Scientifically impossible. And, just in case physics has a problem with me, the Monitor built this containment armor."

Pariah stared at Alex who understood he was a curiosity and decided to accept it. "You can't exist," Pariah said.

"And yet I'm here. The Monitor said you'd both have problems. He also said, this is a quote, 'Get over it.' We've got work to do." For a moment I thought he looked up at me. "All of us," he added.

Pariah followed but stayed at a healthy distance. "You were an infant. Nobody had time to teach you anything. How can you—?"

"Talk?" Alex interrupted. "The Monitor provided learning discs. You should know that's how it's done. I was taught most of Earth's culture. Actually, the culture of multiple Earths, my own included. Also, history, science, mathematics and so much more."

Lyla was confused but I was beginning to understand. I mentally marked a check of approval on the Monitor's invisible chart.

Other than rapid aging, artificial intelligence implants and a logic inconsistency that by all rights should blow up known existence, I'd say I'm pretty normal. Now follow me. The Monitor left instructions. We need to go back to the telecommunications room."

Lyla didn't move. "Not until I know the plan. And if it doesn't sound like something the Monitor would do, I'll kill you."

Pariah reached for her. "Lyla, don't. The Monitor wants us...."

"Wants us to do what?" Lyla's eyes narrowed in anger. "All we have is his word for it," she said, indicating Alex. "He's a baby who's grown up in less than twenty-four hours. How do I know we can trust him. I couldn't even trust me."

Alex understood. "There's no danger here, Lyla. I was given a list of instructions. As predicted events unfold, he wants us to follow them. The universes are slowly merging. To keep the peace he's already summoned back-up forces."

"Back-up forces?"

"The other heroes, Lyla. We shouldn't keep them waiting."

"All right," she said. "Show me these forces."

We entered the telecommunications chamber and my mind, what little was left of it, was blown away by what was waiting for us.

Lois Lane Earth—1

Lois stood at the intersection of Siegel Street and Harbor Blvd. Behind her was supposed to be Metropolis Port, a mile-long series of interconnected docks that welcomed tankers, south of 12th street, and passenger ships, north of 17th. Between the two separated areas had been government offices and cargo firms.

"Perry," Lois calmly said into her cell phone. "You are definitely not going to believe this."

To her right, Lois would almost always find at least two city-sized cruise ships letting out tourists for their day trip into Metropolis, or loading on new passengers about to begin their journey south to Bermuda or the Caribbean.

"Remember the docks? There's supposed to be ships. And people. And God knows what else."

Sometimes, she thought, she envied people's ability to get away and have fun. Lois couldn't remember her last real vacation.

"It's gone, Perry. All of it."

Where piers 37 and 38 were the night before when her number 7 train sped past them on her way back home, Lois instead stared at a volcano rising at least three stories high. Something inside the rim was spewing fumes and she saw a blood red reflective glow on the clouds above.

But Metropolis, solid on its bedrock foundation, was not built over any previous seismic activity.

"It's not only a volcano, Perry. I mean that's impossible enough. But it's surrounded by a jungle."

She wished she was in the Planet offices just to see Perry's reactions.

"Yeah, I know. There's no jungles within a continent of here. But, Perry,

there's no jungles anywhere that look like what I'm seeing. At least there hasn't been for a hundred fifty million years."

Bulbous and barrel-stemmed cycads, thick with large pink flowers, pushed up from the mud surrounding the tangle of *Williamsonia* gymnosperms, prehistoric sequoias, ferns and conifers that grew tall and wild in the same place a food warehouse had been just six hours before.

As Lois squinted to see through an ammonia mist past the mottled brown and green stems, she made out a great moss-covered swamp beyond, its lava-encrusted surface peppered with crowns of thick ginkgo leaves.

She realized she was looking at a mix and match version of the Mesozoic era, the Cretaceous and Jurassic periods all mashed into one.

From above she could hear the trilling shriek of *something* edging closer. When she looked up through the thick cluster of tall palms, Lois saw a pteranodon, its twenty-five foot wingspan carried it over the forest and toward the city. *Okay. I was not expecting that.*

The palms swayed against the wind, pushed from something inside. A half dozen chicken-sized creatures—Lois didn't know they were called *Compsognathus*—skittered out of the forest, squawking their way toward 10th Avenue.

"Control yourself, calm down," she reminded herself, aloud and into the phone.

"Lois? Are you there? What's happening? Talk to me." Perry's voice was, as always, deep and bellowing. The first time Lois met him he almost scared her out of her career. It took everything she had to keep her composure and not quit on the spot.

Perry enjoyed harassing newbies. The bad ones would quit while the good ones fought back. Perry White's natural order of selection. It worked every time. Two weeks later Lois was routinely insulting him.

"I'm here, Perry. I'm fine. The dock area seems to have become Jurassic Park, without the concession stands and the nauseatingly cute kids." Lois heard a noise behind her, and turned to what had been 10th Avenue just seconds ago. "Hold on, Perry. Something's going on."

Tall, glistening spires unlike anything she had ever seen before phased into view as if a shimmering, magic curtain just parted. The spires were actually hovering above different parts of a great tower, floating freely, not attached to them in any way she could see.

Windows, or perhaps they were portals, slid open and several small vehicles flew out of them. An instant later, the windows sealed up again; its seams so tight Lois was unable to see where the openings had been.

"Perry, what I'm about to tell you is not a joke. To my right is essentially King Kong territory, and to my left is, I don't know, Star Wars. It's like time is collapsing. I'm seeing the past, present and future all at once."

"I know that, Lois. I'm looking down onto 5th street and I'm seeing soldiers there. Revolutionary war soldiers. And no, I'm pretty sure they're not part of a re-enactment. The world's going crazy. Maybe you should get back here."

"You want me to leave?" Lois stared at the panorama of conflicting time periods sweeping past her: A Japanese samurai stumbled into traffic, his sword drawn ready for battle, was suddenly hit by an out of control bus. To her side, a frightened American cowboy was waving his pistol at a confused warrior from Egypt's middle kingdom. In the sky, the pteranodon was joined by a flock of bird-like creatures, from what time period or place they came Lois had no idea.

"Perry, are you insane? I'm taking a cab to mid-town. I can't wait to see what's going on there."

"Lois, don't be foolish. Lois?"

Amelia Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, flew their Lockheed Electra past her, possibly en route to their mobius-strip oblivion. Lois flipped her cell phone cover back in place, cutting off the call.

"Like hell I'm going back."

Thirty-seven

In the time of Arthur there were tales of knights gathered from every county, ready to battle the enemy in the name of the King. As I lay back on the grassy hill behind my parent's home, reading from the picture books I so treasured, I always imagined what such a gathering would be like.

I pictured hundreds of warriors standing tall before the proud spires of Camelot, swords in hand, their armor shining, their steeds at the ready. These, I knew, would only be the best of the best, the warriors all others aspired to be.

I had wondered how the Monitor, with only a spattering of chosen fighters, could take on an evil that had already destroyed countless worlds.

There was no way I could have prepared myself for the truth.

The Monitor had originally brought only a handful of fighters to his satellite, but as I stared into the huge room I saw not the dozen plus who had been dispatched throughout time to protect his machines, but nearly a thousand super-powered warriors waiting for battle.

For most, their armor wasn't leather and chain mail, but gaudily-colored costumes, many with masks and gloves and flowing capes.

Though some held swords, for others their weapons were internal: heat vision, super-strength, mind control, and so much more.

I was staring at the greatest assemblage of heroes ever put together.

I recognized the JLA, of course. J'onn J'onzz, Hawkman, Zatana, Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman and the others. They were all here.

Not far from them were the Titans; many of them, like Nightwing, Changeling, Wonder Girl, and even Wally as Kid Flash, began as our teen

partners until they were ready to go off on their own. They teamed up with other new teen heroes like Starfire, Cyborg, Raven, and Jericho.

The Metal Men were elemental robots who possessed not only artificial intelligence but well developed emotions. I'd met Will Magnus, their inventor, at a symposium several years back, but his specialty was so far beyond my realm of knowledge I couldn't follow more than a quarter of what he said. Still, I had read of the Metal Men's exploits and assumed they would be valuable additions here.

There were also hundreds I didn't know, heroes from other Earths, I supposed, or from time periods I never visited. I tried to figure out from their look, speech, and demeanor who they were or at least what they could do, but as soon as I focused on one, I lost them again in the constantly shifting crowd.

The trouble was there were so many of them individuals disappeared like Waldo, blending into a wallpaper of colored costumes.

Scattered in the crowd I made out a few members of the Legion of Super-Heroes from Earth's distant future. I'd met Saturn Girl and Cosmic Boy before, but they were surrounded by several dozen others I didn't know.

Because he was given wide berth, I saw Swamp Thing standing to the side, alone. God knows what a walking sump must smell like. Rising above him, I could make out Plastic Man's head bobbing up and down on a stretched-out twenty foot neck checking over the crowd.

"Hey, who are all these bozos?" he asked.

My sentiments exactly.

Across the room from him was one of my dearest friends, Ralph Dibny, the Elongated Man. Like Plastic Man, Ralph stretched himself over the crowd, allowing for a better view of the hundreds gathered. Unlike Plas, he couldn't reshape his body into other forms. Iris and I often enjoyed informal dinners with Ralph and his wonderfully funny wife, Sue.

Superman of Earth-1, my Superman, was talking with Dr. Light and Metamorpho while Superman-2 told the Batman and Robin of Earth-1 about his battle in Kamandi's future.

Though Robin's jaw was agape with the thought of a post-apocalyptic Earth, Batman's dour expression never changed. Typical. You never knew what he was thinking.

Somewhere in the middle of the room, Doctor Fate, a sorcerer from Earth-2, waited patiently near four rather ordinary looking deep sea divers, the Sea Devils, I heard them tell him. I'd love to know why they had been brought here.

A knight dressed in golden armor rode astride a winged horse. They hovered ten feet or so above the crowd. I'm sure those directly below him wished the horse would circle elsewhere, over someone else. Flying horse or not, when you gotta go you gotta go.

If I stared at the crowd long enough I could make out a few cowboys looking confused by what was happening while a handful of soldiers, I think from the second World War, huddled not far from them, equally puzzled, but ready for action.

The people I knew were a literal roll call of heroes, some of the best and most powerful who ever lived. A few had become lifelong friends, people I cherished more as family than co-workers.

But what surprised me most were the so-called villains who mingled with them.

I hated the word "villain."

In many ways it replaced the seriousness of a criminal's evil deeds with comical images culled from melodramatic old movie serials of nasty men in long curling mustaches tying innocent women to convenient railroad tacks.

These people were our enemies, complete with powers they've used to hurt others. They were thieves, murderers and often, to use an overused and equally melodramatic word, evil.

I always thought the word villain was a little too silly. I wish there was an easy alternative to use. Enemy? Foe? I don't know. Maybe if I say it enough I'll forget how silly it sounds.

So the villains were here, too, apparently ready to join the cause. I didn't know if the Monitor or Lyla controlled them or if they had come on their own, but I knew, in this case, where perhaps a million plus universes had already been destroyed, that we needed all the power we could get.

Maybe it would do them some good. I'd like to think they'd see the error of their ways, or something like that.

Okay, so I'm naïve. Comes with the spandex, the oath and the secret decoder ring.

Thirty-eight

Lyla and Alex made their way to one of the high perches. Lyla was nervous as she looked over the crowd. "You'll be fine," I heard Alex tell her. "Remember, we're all here for the same reason." He saw Plastic Man roll himself up into a ball and carom off the walls. "Well, maybe not him," Alex added. Lyla laughed. "Thanks," she said. "I needed that."

"Excuse me." Lyla tried to speak over the din, but her voice, cracking with emotion, was barely heard.

Superman-2 flew above the crowd. "Time to settle down, people," he said.

There were very few who commanded the respect or perhaps fear, of both heroes and villains alike, but Superman could. He knew the effect he had on others and continued hovering so they could see him. "We all know what's happening to our worlds," he said. "It's time to figure out what we can do about it."

Blok, a living stone creature and one of the Legion of Super-Heroes, interrupted. "I know what I've seen. But I don't know who's attacking us."

"We'll get to that in a minute," Superman said. "Lyla and Alex will explain everything."

As Superman continued to hover next to them, all eyes turned to Lyla. She acknowledged his help then stepped forward. How to begin, she wondered.

"I don't know how many universes have already been destroyed, but I can tell you only five remain. We also know they've been targeted for destruction. Earth-1 and 2 are next, but the Monitor, a man who I...." Alex took her hand. "Go on. You're doing fine."

She drew in a deep breath and continued. "The Monitor saved your worlds by bringing them into this limbo dimension. I can assure you the two Earths are safe, but only temporarily. Parts of both universes are beginning to intersect. Eventually they will merge and destroy each other. But we have a plan to prevent that from happening."

I knew that was Superman-2's cue to continue. He floated toward the perch, drawing their attention to him.

"Like some of you," he started, "I was given powers. Like most of you, I realized I got them for a reason and that I had to use what I was to help others."

I saw Superman-2 turn to a cluster of villains with a look that said, "I wouldn't take it kindly if you interrupted." They didn't.

"There's no way to say this casually. We were brought together to save all existence. Whether we can or not, I don't know. Whether you join us in self-interest or not," he glanced at the villains again, "Everyone benefits."

I'm sure the others didn't see it, but for an instant his eyes teared over. He covered with a cough, then went on.

"Those who know me know I don't often talk about personal matters. But I have a wife I love and friends I care deeply for, some of them are here, but many of them, not blessed with special abilities, are still at home. I'm sure all of you have people you care about, too. So, please, help us for their sake. We need you. We need all of you. It's the only hope any of us have."

As Alex stepped forward to explain to them the origins of the multiverse, I thought of Iris and accepted, perhaps for the first time, that despite all my personal desires, I was being kept here for a different reason than just finding her.

The Monitor said I had a role to play in the crisis. The voices in the speed force seemed to agree. Reluctantly, so did I.

Iris, as much as I loved her, would have to wait.

Queen Hippolyta Earth—1

Queen Hippolyta and the Amazons, after centuries of oppression at the hand of man, was led by Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, born of the brow of mighty Zeus, from ancient Greece, past the veil of mists, through cold and threatening seas, to what was supposed to be an island paradise. As promised, for more than three millennia, Themyscira provided the Amazons with welcome shelter and abundant food.

Lately, however, Hippolyta had become displeased, not only with life on Themyscira, but with her daughter, Diana. Ever since childhood Diana had resisted her patient teachings, and as an adult, broken the sacred covenant and left Themyscira for Man's world.

Hippolyta gazed out her chamber window toward the churning waters crashing against the island's high cliffs. On a normal day watching that would have revitalized her, reminding her of their journey here and her people's long life in paradise.

This past week, however, the once inviting blue sky was painted in threatening shades of red. The waters now threatened to rise above the cliffs and crash their way through the city.

In the Senate chambers, a hundred voices demanded that she not only abandon her long-held policies that kept the Amazons safe from the wars of man, but that she also join their former enemies in battle.

What made it worse was that it was Diana who led her subjects in rebellion. Hippolyta wasn't sure how to react to change. Athena's promise of peace and prosperity was supposed to have lasted forever.

"Enough," Hippolyta said to herself. "Man's problems are not ours. That is why we chose to live here, away from our tormentors."

Diana stood in front of the crowd and stared at the high balcony. She

could make out the doorway and beyond it, obscured by shadows, Hippolyta standing alone in her bed chamber, refusing to step into the sunlight. It was as if hiding there could help her avoid direct confrontation.

"Mother, please hear us out. We can no longer stand alone. What threatens the world also threatens us."

Hippolyta turned again to the ocean, keeping her gaze low to avoid the blood sky. "Mother." Diana was now hovering next to her, floating on the air currents. "I know how hard this is for you. You've fought so long to keep us safe...."

"And you want to abandon it all? Diana, once they know we're here, they'll hunt us all over again. But what do you care? You're one of them now."

Diana lowered herself to the balcony and stood next to her mother. "No. I've never stopped being an Amazon. But we can't afford to be alone any more. I think you know that, too."

Hippolyta turned to her daughter, her eyes as red and raw as the sky. "You're an Amazon? Diana, look at yourself. You call yourself Wonder Woman now. You live with our enemies. You slave for them. And now you want us to surrender to them."

"No. I want you to fight alongside them. This isn't the old times, mother. The Gods no longer control...."

"That's the problem, Diana. The Gods knew to abandon Man. Why can't you accept their wisdom?"

Diana looked at her mother. "If Earth dies, the Amazons will die with it. Please help us."

Hippolyta wanted to reach out to her daughter, to put her arms around her again as she had when Diana was a child. She wanted to comfort her, to assure her that everything would be all right. But this time she could not.

The red sky frightened her. The oceans were unrestrained in their violence. Thousands of sea birds cawed wildly and flew frantically from something unseen to something unknown. Things, Hippolyta knew, were not right.

She turned to Diana, her head low, her eyes closed. "You came here for nothing. These are not our problems. You left us, now solve them without us."

She could hear her daughter start to speak, but then stop. A moment later she heard a whooshing sound and opened her eyes already knowing she was alone.

She looked onto the plaza to see it empty of Amazon warriors. They were following her daughter into battle. So be it, she thought. *It has begun.*

As Zeus killed Cronus, his father and youngest of the Titan Gods, as the child always rises to replace the parent, it was only right that Diana stood against her mother to lead their people into war.

This was the rite of passage.

"Athena, grant me knowledge," she cried out. "Have I lost more than a daughter this day?"

If Athena was listening, she didn't answer.

Perhaps, Hippolyta thought, this was the will of the Gods: Man and Amazon destined to perish together at the end of time.

She fell to her knees and, thinking of the daughter she still loved so deeply and missed so much, she cried.

Thirty-nine

Reactions.

What interested me most about Alex's talk was not what he said *but* everyone's reactions to him.

The concept that the universe had originally been one and then, at the very dawn of time, split into a multiverse of universes separated by the merest of temporal frequencies, was a stretch for many to understand. But the idea that to save our worlds we had to make the multiverse one again, was incomprehensible.

"Luthor, we have the power to fight any enemy, but what you're talking about is changing history. That's been proven impossible."

The voice came from a tall bearded man, dressed like a barbarian in a loincloth adorned with bone clasps. His quiet, cultured voice fought his savage appearance.

He announced himself as Travis Morgan, Warlord of Skartaris, wherever that was. Obviously, the man had a story to tell, but at the moment, I'm sad to admit, it was irrelevant.

A small, lithe yellow-skinned figure snaked his way through the crowd, cackling as he shoved his face into Morgan's.

"Giving up already, man? You some kinda cheese-eater? Warlord? Hah! My yellow ass." Morgan reached for his sword, but the tiny figure was gone, hopping toward Superman-1's side.

I recognized him as the Creeper. I was never sure what his powers were or whether he was actually a crime fighter as he claimed, but his name definitely described the feelings I got whenever I saw him.

A wild look flashed across his eyes as he grinned. "Supes, you tell 'im we can do it. Or maybe you wanna pound a couple'a the bad guys here first.

Just 'cause." He glared at Captain Cold, Solomon Grundy and our other foes, and laughed, challenging them to react.

For a moment I was prepared for a battle to break out. I don't know why, but the Joker began to laugh. "Oh, this is rich. Splendid. Wonderful." He gasped between gulps of air. He doubled over, fell to the ground, and kicked his feet like a convulsing two year old.

"Uncle Creepy thinks he can frighten us. You'd like us to fight, wouldn't you? Sorry, but no way, elf boy. We know which side our butter is breaded on."

He sashayed over to the astonished Creeper. Face-to-face, I wasn't sure which of these two lunatics would be easier to deal with. "Banana-boy," the Joker crowed, "We villains are the weird and wacky wild cards not to be trusted, not you."

He pranced around the Creeper as he continued his free-form spiel. "Hell, even my mother at her funeral didn't trust me. Of course she wasn't dead yet and there I was with a rented casket and all. But you, on the other hand, you're one of the good guys and therefore, ergo, guess what: predictable."

He leaned into the Creeper and with a mad look in his eyes, kissed him on the cheek. "So, my little plantain, don't go Joker on us. I was crazy long before your eggs got scrambled, and I'll be laughing long after you're just a yellow-smear of roadkill. So as long as we're saving the world with you, guess what? You're not gonna think even once about closing down our party."

The Joker leaned in closer to the Creeper, his already grotesque smile spread even wider. "But once we're out of danger, when you and your heroic gang of idiots are exhausted and more than half dead, guess who's gonna finish the job?"

He turned from the Creeper and with his hands gesturing for applause from his cronies, he re-entered the throng. "Countin' the seconds, creepers jeepers."

Hourman from Earth-2 ignored them and turned to Alex. "Do we know what this villain wants? Can he be reasoned with?"

"There is no reasoning with him." All eyes turned to Pariah now standing next to Lyla. "He asks for nothing and offers no alternative. He causes only destruction."

It was a soft, firm voice that broke through the din. "Only two questions, Luthor. Who is the enemy?" Batman asked. "And what do we need to do to stop him?"

Lyla answered instead. "He calls himself the Anti-Monitor. But that's not his name."

Blue Beetle laughed. "Good thing. That sorta name kinda limits your job possibilities. 'Sorry, no Monitors around for you to be against. Come back next week. We're expecting a new shipment then."

Lyla glared at him. "I said that was not his name. It's what he is: pure antimatter."

"None of this makes any difference," Alex said. "Because events have moved so quickly, I think it would be best for you to return to your worlds, to see your loved ones, and to fully understand the dangers they face as the universes merge."

Luthor glanced at Lyla, looking for approval. He may look like he was seventeen, but I knew he was a baby born just hours before. I didn't know if his growth was just physically accelerated or if, somehow, he actually functioned as an adult.

He continued. "Once you all agree to help, we will go to the final three universes and bring them here, too."

"That's all defensive crap." Per Degaton, one of the villains complained. "When are we taking out Mr. Bad?"

This time Alex didn't need Lyla's approval to answer. "Once all five universes are out of the Anti-Monitor's reach, we will combine forces and attack."

Psimon's grin scared even me. "We're going to do a helluva lot more than just attack him. When it comes to violence, face it, kid, you're living in our world."

The villains laughed, Joker perhaps the loudest.

I got it and I didn't like it. The joke was on us. We always fought hard to do what was right, but circumstances now demanded that the kid gloves had to come off.

To save the final five universes, the heroes were going to have to learn how to kill.

Aquaman Earth—1

During the early fifth century, Attila The Hun ruled from the Rhine to the Caspian Sea and had begun plans to annex land as far west as Ravenna and Constantinople to the east.

With his brother, Bleda at his side, Attila rode through the still-burning streets of Singidunum, toward the *Dunav*, a small riverside tavern he frequented many times before. From there he would down some predictably wretched beer while his warriors razed what had proudly been called the Round Fort by the once-mighty Romans.

As they approached, the tavern appeared blurry and out of focus, as if shimmering in waves of heat. But the day was clear and the sun not even at its full height.

Worried about his sight, he reached for Bleda, but saw his brother disappear. He stared at his own hands but they had vanished, too, lost in the shadowy haze.

Attila turned, looking everywhere, but the world he knew was gone.

When he could see again, he realized he was still on his horse, Bleda was at his side, a dozen of his warriors were behind him as they had been.

But he also saw hundreds of fish swimming past the coral reefs that surrounded them. They were underwater.

He grabbed his throat expecting to drown, but he didn't. Sharks streaked by, barely paying attention. They were after other game.

"Brother, look here." It was Bleda calling him. "You have to see this."

Behind his brother he saw great golden temples that stretched into the distance. They were standing at the gates of a city unlike any he had ever dreamed.

This was no farmer's village ripe for plunder. There were hundreds of buildings here, older than the temples of Rome, but they sparkled like new, lit by a sun-like globe that he instinctively knew, at the ocean floor, could not be the sun he knew.

There were people here, too, and as they swam past they stared at him bewildered by the sight of men riding horses.

"Who are you?" The voice was deep, and though he knew it spoke in a language different from his, he was able to understand it. "I asked who you are."

The man speaking, his hair long and golden, wearing what appeared to be a bright orange shirt and tight green leggings, was riding a giant seahorse. Behind him were two dozen others riding other beasts of the sea. *Am I drunk? Is this a nightmare?*

"My name is Aquaman," the stranger said. "You're in Atlantis and I'm its king. Who are you?"

Attila shook his head. "You're speaking in a strange language. Why do I understand you?"

"We're using telepathy. My mind reaches into yours. You're instinctively doing the same, even if you didn't know it."

"But why aren't I dead? Why aren't any of us dead? We're underwater. We can't breathe here."

Attila reached for his sword, but faster than he could move, Aquaman grabbed it and snapped it in half. "No weapons." He tossed the pieces aside.

Attila stared at the broken shards. Its steel was the finest made in Toledo, how could anyone human break it?

He glared at Aquaman. "Atlantis? That's a Greek lie fathers tell children at bedtime. How can you live underwater? How can I? Are you sorcerers? How did you bring me here? Answer me."

Aquaman didn't know how to answer. He closed his eyes and sent a thought to his wife, Mera, on the other side of the city almost two miles away. "The disturbance brought more strangers here. They look like barbarians. Their leader's confused."

Mera's thoughts washed over him. "I can tell. They're not the only ones. Our northern district's disappeared. I'm looking at an alien colony that appeared in its place. Perhaps a dozen buildings, all made out of some sort of gel."

In his mind, Aquaman could see what his wife was looking at. "I'm

speaking with, I don't know what they are, but they're not from this world. And they don't know how they came here."

Aquaman again sent his thoughts across the city. "Have you heard from Garth and Tula?" Aqualad had been his partner and for a while, a member of the Teen Titans. Tula was not only a soldier in the guard, but Garth's girl friend.

"They're leading a force against the soldiers who appeared in Gorus. They claim to be from Earth's future and they've sworn to destroy us for bringing them here. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"Right now I wouldn't discount anything. Any word from the Justice League?"

"No one's at their headquarters."

"That could mean they're on the job. Good. Mera, I need to take care of things here. Can you handle the aliens?"

"They're confused, but they don't seem violent."

"Thank Poseidon for small favors. Later then. And I love you."

"As I do you."

"Aquaman."

Garth's voice, unexpected and urgent, exploded in his head. Telepathy not only transmitted thoughts, but emotion.

"Aqualad, what is it?"

"We're under siege. The soldiers... more of them are appearing everywhere. And there's cowboys here, too."

"Cowboys?" Aquaman wasn't sure he understood.

"From America's past. Aquaman, I know how crazy that sounds, but they're here. About fifty of them and they're working with the soldiers."

Aqualad's voice quieted and Aquaman could sense him trying to control his emotions. "Tula's been injured. We need help. Soon."

"Garth, try to find a place to hide." Aquaman turned to see Attila, growing angry with impatience. "I'm coming. With my own army. Hang in there."

Aquaman floated to Attila's side. "We have questions, too. And enemies. Help us and we'll send you back to where you belong."

Attila eyed him suspiciously. He was trying to analyze the Sea King and perhaps make an offer of his own.

Aquaman had no time for negotiation. If the barbarian wasn't responding to requests, perhaps he'd find it easier to understand a threat.

"I want an answer now. My people have protected you so far by letting you breathe underwater. Don't make us rescind our gift."

Attila glanced at Bleda and his men. With the ocean surrounding them, they were still cautiously taking each breath as if it could be their last.

Though he doubted this King of Atlantis would let them die beneath the sea, he and his men were in no position to make outrageous demands. Still, he thought, to take away the sting of subservience, there had to be a way to get something for their service.

"You have great wealth here, King Aquaman. Share it with us and we will gladly ride at your side. I give you the word of Attila."

Attila the Hun.

Aquaman reeled at the name. There wasn't time to figure out how a fifth century Hun appeared in Atlantis. Aquaman needed his power to save Garth, Tula and the others. As he saw Attila unsheathe a hidden second blade, he knew he had no other choice.

"All right. You'll have your pick of treasure. But if you betray us I swear that what's left of your bodies when the sharks are done with it will never be found."

Attila's smile was thin and frightening. "An empty threat, Fishman. If I turn on you, it will be your blood that feeds the fish. But we should go. Your friends need our arms and I look forward to acquiring your treasure."

Aquaman said nothing but was secretly pleased; now they could both claim victory. "This way," he pointed as he swam north toward Gorus.

A sword's tip behind him was the undisputed tyrant of fifth century Earth. Ahead of them Garth and Tula were in a war with soldiers from the future and cowboys from America's past. And, at the Palace, Mera was negotiating with aliens from some unknown planet.

Aquaman prayed that the Justice League knew what to do, because he certainly didn't.

Forty

I followed Green Lantern back to Coast City, about twenty miles north of San Diego. Its long, winding shoreline was dotted with beautiful beaches and expensive hotels.

Jutting into the ocean to the west was a peninsula controlled by the U.S. Navy. More than two thousand sailors lived there, rotating in and out depending on the political circumstances of the moment.

The H.M.S. Exeter was anchored off shore and British sailors were seen wandering the Coast City streets and shopping malls.

Green Lantern flew past Ferris Aircraft on his way to the Coast City Marina. Hal Jordan worked at Ferris. For years he'd been my best friend and I desperately wanted to see him now, but even if I did what good could come of it?

Hal wouldn't know I was there. We couldn't talk. He was no longer Green Lantern and even if he was, there was nothing he could do to help me.

Maybe it was kinder not to involve him in this now.

I continued following Jon as he circled over what used to be the marina just behind the city's huge convention center. The marina, which had once sprawled on for blocks, was no longer there, replaced instead by what turned out to be the rolling hillside and gentle valley of the Marne river about 75 miles north of Paris, France, circa 1917.

The lush battleground, stained with the blood of Americans and Germans, pushed through half the convention center all the way to Broadway.

This was, I had to keep reminding myself, modern Coast City.

Time and place truly no longer had any meaning.

American doughboys from the 2nd division were on the south side of the

Marne. The German 7th Army moved down from the north, its handpicked shock troops, equipped with machine guns, easily cut through the American resistance.

The German General pointed to an area outside the war perimeter where he could see half of the still-existing convention center rise up where the river abruptly ended. He sent some of his men to investigate while his other shock troops continued their advance.

If they made it into Coast City's downtown I knew there would be even more chaos. But I also knew I couldn't help the poor Americans caught in the overwhelming attack. I followed the Germans as they moved toward the convention center.

As I ran, I saw above me a blazing red German Fokker tri-plane with a large black Iron Cross emblazoned on its side. Its pilot fired on Green Lantern.

Jon's ring protected him with a full body shield as he circled the Fokker. These people, he knew, were fighting a war that took place shy of a hundred years before. He could easily use his Power Ring to eliminate the pilot as well as the German soldiers, but Jon had sworn he would never kill.

He swept past the tri-plane and gestured for the pilot to move on. But the pilot—I'm sure he was astonished at the sight of a flying man—banked the Fokker into a dive, then circled back up and behind Green Lantern, once again firing at him.

His bullets splayed off Jon's emerald shield, caroming them back into the tri-plane's wings. The plane began to fall. At first I didn't see why, but then I noticed a stream of smoke gush out from its fuel tank.

Jon's ring flashed again. He created a long curved ramp under the Fokker's wheels that carried it safely to the ground. As the plane hobbled in for its landing, I saw its pilot, a gaunt-faced German in a green overcoat with a dark brown fur collar. The enemy ace acknowledged Green Lantern's help with a sharp salute.

Lantern arced back toward the Germans advancing on the convention center. In another minute they would be out of the war zone and into Coast City. I saw Jon's eyes close as he concentrated, envisioning a large dome that circled the war zone, isolating it from the rest of the city.

The soldiers pounded on the emerald wall but couldn't push their way through. They fired their machine guns at it, also to no avail.

Inside the dome, Jon created several smaller walls preventing the Germans from reaching the wounded American soldiers. *Keep them apart. Don't let them kill each other. At least not right now.*

Satisfied that he had done all he could, Jon flew off. I thought I might follow, but decided against it.

Instead, I circled back toward Ferris Aircraft.

Forty-one

I made my way through the security gate and ran past the hangars where pilots and mechanics worked on their new designs. Ferris was the industry leader in new tech, and Hal, although he'd been there for nearly two decades—he began with them while in his teens—was still their best test pilot.

I raced for the company cafeteria. It was early afternoon and Hal would most likely be eating a late lunch. A burger or a BLT on rye, fries of course—he never had a problem with fatty foods—a milk shake and coffee. I never understood that combination but then he never understood why I needed to pack away two or three full-sized pizza pies for a quick snack.

I saw his best friend, the mechanic Tom Kalmaku, walking with Carol Ferris, Ferris' CEO, as they entered the cafeteria. They were talking airplane mechanics. I hung around for another minute hoping they might mention Hal, but when the conversation got deeper into ion engines, I quickly left them behind.

I was a forensics scientist. Airplane mechanics was not even close to my specialty.

I was aware that if I found him I couldn't let Hal know I was alive, or whatever it was that I was. But I thought if I could see him one more time it would make me, I don't know, happy, I guess.

Hal wasn't in the cafeteria, so I checked the gym. He wasn't there either. I sped in and out of every hangar, but there was no sign of him anywhere. Just in case, I checked the company tennis courts. Zip.

Maybe he hadn't come to work today. Maybe he took off for a lunch elsewhere or was demonstrating one of Carol's jets somewhere else in the world. Knowing Hal, he could be anywhere.

All I knew was I wanted to see him and he wasn't where I hoped he would be. Pretty selfish, Allen. I don't have a life so he couldn't have one either.

As I took off I thought of him and Carol and me and Iris. Those times together were the best in my life, and though I recognized it even then I never seriously acknowledged it, not even to myself.

I wasn't brought up to be overly emotional, my damned Midwestern heritage and all that. So I never told him how much he meant to me. Of course, if I did, he'd probably look at me funny, accuse me of being a girly-

manorsomet

I wasn't, knowing, of course, that I didn't smoke. "Aha! Proof of major girlitude, Allen!"

I didn't have a lot of friends who I felt close to, but Hal, as different as we were, was numero uno on that all-too-short list.

I ran to the security gate then turned back for one last look. Ferris Aircraft had disappeared.

It was happening again.

I watched an Egyptian pyramid shimmer into view, stone by stone as it had been originally built. The desert started to form around it, spreading quickly to where I stood.

The Sphinx suddenly rose out of the sand and in seconds it towered over me. But the nose of this Sphinx was still intact, not fallen victim to weather and man, and its face was not of Khafre, the 4th King of Egypt's 4th Dynasty, but of the 19th Dynasty Pharaoh, Ramesses 1, born more than a thousand years later.

This was not the Sphinx of Earth-1. My Earth.

Not only time, but the universes were beginning to merge!

Ferris Aircraft had completely disappeared, including the air fields far to its north. I knew that didn't mean it had been destroyed; Carol, Tom and the others might have found themselves in any place or in any time on either Earth-1 or 2.

I realized there was nothing else I could do here and staying would only depress me.

I came because thinking of Hal made me think of Carol and especially of Iris and me. We were four friends, more than friends actually. Family.

Dammit. The more I thought of the four of us the faster I had to get away from there.

I ran. God, did I run. Faster and faster. Get away from Ferris Air. Get away from California. Get away from it all.

But as I ran I realized I couldn't run away from those memories.

I had to run toward them.

I had to break through to the speed force. More than before, I had to know where Iris was and I had to make the force take me to her.

In less than one second I passed the speed of sound. It took nearly eight more ticks of the clock to approach the speed of light.

So far so good. Of course, I'd done this a million times before and never came close to falling into that... *place*.

I picked up speed.

I could begin to make out colors. This was it. I ran faster now, straining as hard as I could.

But then, the colors faded. No, they simply shut off abruptly as if a switch had been pulled somewhere. A voice spoke and I suddenly fell back, away from the colors and the speed force, as if I had hit something hard.

I had heard only one word, but it spoke volumes to me.

The voice said, "No."

Forty-two

I was back on the Monitor's satellite.

The speed force or whoever was keeping me around was still playing its games with me.

"Go to hell," I cried out. "Find someone else to do your damned errands."

There was no answer. Obviously, it knew it could do whatever it wanted with me.

In a moment of self-determined brilliance, I thought of something else I wanted to say and shouted to the voice again, positive this time I'd be heard.

When I was alive I often saw people on street corners standing on wooden boxes also shouting to God or someone. So, was I as crazy as I always thought they were or were they trapped in some other-dimensional limbo existence, too?

"Hey, voices," I called out. "Guess what? I've got another idea. If the Anti-Monitor destroyed my world in the future, then let me go back into the past.

I realized Iris was still alive in the past.

"I don't care if I see her at age 25 or 30 or 35. I just want to see her. So how about it?"

Still no answer. The speed force guys were really starting to tick me off.

Jimmy Olsen Earth—1

Jimmy Olsen snapped another series of photographs, then removed and marked the film cannister and dropped it in his camera case. He had already taken more than 400 shots and he hadn't yet photographed a fraction of what was going on.

He switched over to his video camera to record the chaos in sound and movement. These are gonna be great, he kept thinking. *Pulitzer prize, Oscar-winning great.*

Jimmy made his way to Burnley Boulevard. He had been there just the night before when the Vanguard Theater played a three-picture Hitchcock retrospective. Jimmy staggered out of the show at about one AM and headed home to sleep.

But where Martin Landau, about to kill a wounded Cary Grant, was shot by a policeman and fell to his death, there now stood a mist-covered fetid marshland.

Four cavemen crouched on its far shore, no more than ten feet away from him. They were either Cro-Magnon or Neanderthal, he could never remember which was which.

Three of them, more primitive than the fourth, were hunched over some freshly killed game, but they were also staring in horror at modern Metropolis.

A car screamed past, honking its annoying horn, and splattered them with mud. One of the cavemen tried to attack the car with his club, but all he connected with was its back fender before it tore around the corner, disappearing from sight.

The fourth caveman was younger and somehow less primitive. The look on his face told the entire story, as though he believed himself to be

dreaming. A moment ago, he might have been out on the plains, hunting, but now a mysterious village rose up around him like the dark forest at river's edge. Where was he, he must have wondered. How had he gotten here?

Jimmy stood his distance, video taping the boy. "Can you understand me?" The boy, frightened, backed himself to the side of the Daily Planet building. He may not have known where he was, but the strange mountain behind him was solid and would protect his back even as his spear would defiantly protect his front.

"Go!" He waved the stranger away while grunting in a language Jimmy couldn't hope to understand. But he certainly understood the gesture. No problem. There were many other stories to pursue. "Be careful," he cautioned as he headed west toward Swan Park.

Carter Braxton, selected in 1775 to represent Virginia at the Continental Congress, was in the thick of the Maryland woods, riding north past his favorite trout stream to sign Jefferson's Declaration. This wasn't the best day for travel, Braxton thought. The sky, normally bright and blue, was now a deep, dark red.

Suddenly, the sky glowed like in an early morning lightning storm, and the woods grew hazy and indistinct. Calm yourself, he repeated. Keep riding. You come this way every month; you know these woods by heart.

But when Braxton broke through into a clearing he found himself in a city unlike any that he had ever seen in the Americas or Europe. The street beneath him wasn't cobblestone or earth, but a flat tar-like substance, hard and black.

There was noise all around him, too, horns like in an orchestra, screaming at him. What is this madness, he thought.

Frightened people ran past him, many dressed not unlike the carved statues in those Egyptian dioramas he'd seen the previous year in the newly opened British Museum. But how could there be so many people here? Not even England's busiest square was so crowded.

Jimmy Olsen snaked his way through the crowd and saw Braxton staring at the strange buildings, wider and taller than England's proudest, their windows shining with a light brighter than any oil lamp.

"Excuse me, do you speak English?" Jimmy asked. Braxton turned and saw the red-haired youth holding a strange device that seemed to be pointed at him.

"Don't aim that weapon at me, boy." Braxton pushed the device aside. Jimmy shook his head. "No, no. It's a camera, not a gun. Can I speak to you?"

"You can tell me where I am."

Jimmy smiled. "America." The man looked at him strangely. "Metropolis." Braxton didn't recognize the name.

Jimmy noticed Braxton's wool riding coat complete with pewter buttons. Under the coat his shirt was white with ruffled cuffs and he wore a lace cravat and brocade vest.

Jimmy knew this man, whoever he was, was definitely not from the present. "My name is Jimmy Olsen. What year are you from?"

"Unless the world has gone insane, and I fear it has, this is 1776. Jefferson summoned me to Philadelphia. Tell me the truth, boy. Where am I?"

This man knows Thomas Jefferson? Jimmy grinned. Now this is a story Perry will eat up. "Okay, it may be hard to understand, but this is your future. Look around you and you'll see how much America has changed. Please, tell me what you think." Jimmy shoved the video camera in Braxton's face and hit record.

Braxton stared at the city. There were no trees here or streams like home to soothe the eye and remind one of nature. He watched the people ran around him without direction. They were so afraid they never considered asking for help. These were not neighbors who came to each other's aid. Indeed, they were worse than strangers.

He sniffed the air which stank like the smell of a dying candle. "You want to know what I think, boy? I think you are lying. This is not America. This is hell!"

Braxton pulled himself away from Jimmy and fell into an alleyway away from the people and the awful cacophonous noise. He looked up to the red sky and prayed to God. "If I have not sinned against Thee, then I beg Thee, relieve me of this madness and return me home."

Jimmy wanted to follow him but was distracted by a loud, growling roar that came from Swan Park two blocks away. A dozen police cars sirened past, rushing to the scene. Something, even crazier than everything else that was going on, required their presence.

Jimmy ran there quickly, pausing only a few seconds here and there to record:

An African tribal village replaced Ninth Street and Shuster Way. Families huddled together in straw and mud huts.

A 29th century Brazilian digital-pyramid now spanned Metropolis River. Its façade glowed with alternating colors forming patterns on its side. They were advertising products Jimmy had never heard of.

Crowded into Hamilton Square, Russian peasants raised their rifles, intent on deposing the tsar. But, as they saw the revolving globe of the Daily Planet building across from the Square, they realized they were nowhere near St. Petersburg.

Jimmy followed the police cars as they made their way through the park to Lake Binder, normally calm and tranquil, the welcome home for the dozen or so ducks who regularly lived there and the occasional tern who paused for a drink on its way south.

As Jimmy approached, his camera recording everything he saw, he was certain there were no ducks or any other birds sipping at the lake today: rising from it was a fifteen foot high, forty foot long, six ton Tyrannosaurus Rex.

And, unlike the mechanical version he used to sit and watch all day as a kid at the history museum, this one was alive and very hungry.

Jimmy scrambled back. He fell to the ground while still tightly holding his camera. No way he was going to lose these shots. He scrambled behind some boulders and prayed he was out of the dinosaur's line of sight. Jimmy carefully tilted the camera against the rock to continue recording, while he reached for his special wrist watch.

Superman had given him the watch four years earlier, when he was all of seventeen. By then they had already been friends for several years.

"There's a signal built inside that will let me know when you're in danger." Superman told him. "But use it only under the direst of emergencies." Of course Jimmy immediately agreed.

Over the years he hesitated to call Superman, but this he thought was the dictionary definition of "dire."

He pressed the stem in the special way Superman showed him, and though he couldn't hear its ultrasonic signal, he knew Superman could.

The police pulled back as the tyrannosaurus stomped toward them. They were not afraid to shoot but they were trying not to.

Jimmy heard the sonic boom before he saw the flash of red and blue streak through the sky.

Superman flew over Hamilton Square. He first saw the dinosaur and then the policemen. A second later he found Jimmy crouching behind the boulders. "You all right?"

Jimmy nodded. "Alive. Been better. But alive."

Superman suddenly looked back over his shoulder, and focused his attention beyond the city. Jimmy knew that look: Superman's superhearing had picked up a distress call and he was using his telescopic vision to locate the source.

Superman turned back to his friend. "You've only got one dinosaur here. Mexico City has dozens."

"But what about..."

"No need to worry."

Superman disappeared in a blur of color. He whipped past the telephone poles planted throughout the park, uprooting them as he flashed by.

Jimmy understood what he was doing: Superman replanted the poles and restrung its wires. He was building an instant run for the T-Rex, penning it safely in place.

The dinosaur roared as it tried to break through the restraining wire, but Superman had wrapped it carefully and it held.

"Watch yourself, Jim. Later."

Jimmy heard Superman's goodbye, but all he could see was that familiar red and blue blur streaking over the city, heading west and south toward Mexico.

He turned to see the T-Rex wear itself out. The huge lizard was not used to expending so much of its energy and it fell to the ground for a much needed rest.

Jimmy changed cameras and took a few more still shots. He then heard an explosion to the south, about a block from the Planet building, he guessed. He ran to see what happened. This could be another story.

"Hell of a day," he said. "Hell of a day."

Forty-three

As I made my way through the satellite I heard a woman's voice. Was it Lyla? I ran, looking for her. But when I found her, just outside the tenth level airlock, I wasn't looking at Lyla. She was Harbinger.

Had she been taken over again?

Standing next to her was Alexander and Pariah. She smiled at them warmly. She might have been dressed as Harbinger, possessed all Harbinger's power, but she was still Lyla.

She was reading from a thick leather-bound book. "My father made me swear, saying, 'Behold, I am dying; in my grave which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.'"

I recognized the words from Sunday morning church services as a child; they came from Genesis, though I didn't remember which verse. Harbinger wiped away her tears and put the Bible down, unable to continue.

She took a deep bracing breath, summoning what strength she had, then looked into the airlock only to quickly pull away. I moved past them to see what was inside.

I saw a golden metal tube inside and realized it was the Monitor's coffin. They were burying him in the infinite limbo he had created from his own energies.

Alexander held onto her, as much for her comfort as his. "His essence is all around us and gives us life," he said. "Only his body remains. Let it now rest in eternal peace."

Pariah said nothing as he pressed the small black button that launched the tiny capsule into the whiteness. He had seen so much death that he thought he was no longer capable of feeling sorrow.

Harbinger watched the golden tube streak past the satellite on its long, endless journey. "From the moment he was born he knew the moment he would die. He rescued me even though he knew I would be the one to take his life."

Her eyes followed the coffin until it finally faded from view. When she turned back to the others she was smiling.

"Funny what you remember now," she said. "When I was a child, I think no more than eight, he brought me back to Earth. It was cold and I didn't have the right clothes for the weather and I'm sure I shivered terribly. But all I remember is that it's the only time we ever left this ship. The only time I ever saw a real sky above my head or breathed air I hadn't breathed before."

As she remembered the story I saw her smile brighten. "It was winter and we were standing on a beach. He was pointing beyond the horizon to where he rescued me years before. His other arm was around me to keep me warm. I loved the feeling that he would always protect me.

"Even then I knew something was different. He had always been so formal but under the bright full sun, he seemed almost loving. I think it was the only time he spoke to me the way I always imagined a father talked to his daughter.

"He told me about the first time he had seen the Earth, still young and primitive. I didn't realize then how many millions of years ago that must have been. But he told me stories about impossible animals and savage beasts and I gleefully took in every word.

"But then his manner changed. He removed his arm and turned away from the ocean. 'Harbinger,' he called me. Not Lyla. 'We are here for one paramount reason. We are here to do what must be done.'

"I didn't understand what he was talking about then. But now I realize he was preparing me for this day. Everything he ever did was to prepare me for this day."

She paused, remembering, and then she continued. "It's funny. I don't know why I don't feel that he was using me. But I don't. Maybe it's because I know that even as he suffered he tried so hard to make sure I wouldn't.

"The Monitor was born knowing his reason for being was to save all existence. Everything he ever did was so he could fulfill that destiny."

Harbinger turned to Pariah. He was still staring into the void. "We can show our love to him by making certain that destiny is achieved.

"It's our job now to save the universe."

Forty-four

Harbinger settled into the Monitor's chair and checked the different view screens ringing the telecommunications room. Each one was focused on a different time and place.

The pictures shifted quickly, from hero to hero, villain to villain, world to world, from one era to the next. I was watching scenes from places I couldn't identify, people I'd never seen before and unbelievable moments of history from my planet and others.

Harbinger hit a button on the keyboard to her side and suddenly the names of the people and places I was watching scrolled across the bottom of the screens. At least I'd now know what and who I was looking at.

I could only make out fragmented moments, but I was certain I saw Noah's ark riding the floodwater currents as well as the Biblical Abraham listening to instructions from afar. Was he actually speaking with God?

I saw Moses lead his people through the desert and Jesus speak to his as he walked a village street.

A hundred different scenes flashed every nanosecond. It was difficult even for me to follow them all.

The Earths, both of them, had changed. Their universes were slowly merging, and where they intersected it was not only a geological overlapping but a temporal one, too.

Earths 1 and 2, because their vibrational frequencies were the closest, had the most connectives. But I saw that sections of other worlds in both their universes, also overlapped. Time was now as fluid and interchangeable as space.

This is what I saw:

I was looking at a fragment of 15th century Venice's Grand Canal. Balanced on a Venetian gondola, Batman and Robin fought the Turkish Army through what had once been the Batcave beneath Bruce Wayne's ancestral home. The Turks, soon to invade Cypress, were assisted by the army of Kanjar Ro, a power mad dictator from the planet Dhor.

To the south of Lima, Peru, Pope Urban II's Crusaders marched lance-in-hand through Gardenus, a 37th century city that was originally on the planet Thanagar. Hawkman and Hawkwoman of the Thanagarian police, led a winged force to stop the Crusaders' advance.

On the screen directly above me I saw Superman-1 in Mexico City leading an army of villains including Sinestro, Solomon Grundy, Eclipso, Black Adam, and Chemo between the twin Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. Nearly two dozen dinosaurs, disoriented by their journey, angrily swarmed the Street of the Dead.

Supergirl, the Martian Manhunter, Blue Beetle, Dr. Fate, and the Black Canary found themselves in Kulus, a city originally on the planet Tamaran that was now on the outskirts of Earth-2's Keystone City, circa 1861. Above Kulus, a fleet of Khundia warships crowded its unpolluted sky along with a hot air balloon from Earth-1's Civil War and a solar-powered cargo cruiser from 37th century Daxam.

The Khund, certain their sudden arrival on this planet was an act of war, opened fire on the Kulus capital, forcing Supergirl and the others into action. Before I could see what happened, the view screen shifted to another scene.

On Rann, third planet from the star sun Alpha Centauri, Adam Strange, his wife Alanna and Jay Garrick, Flash-2, my mentor and inspiration, raced alongside seven armored knights, not from the past as one would expect, but from Earth's future. The knights, astride eight foot mutated Dalmatians, followed them into Ranagar, Rann's capital city. The limits of the view screens didn't let me see what they were running toward.

I saw a section of a 17th century Earth-2 aborigine village suddenly appear on the planet Tamaran where the vanished city of Kulus used to be. The aborigines huddled in fear staring into the sky as the freedom fighters known as the Omega Men used their alien powers to save a Korean War fighter jet before it could crash.

Events such as these were happening throughout both universes. Fragments of time and space intermingled and created jumbles of previously accepted realities.

Not all the screens showed moments of violence. Some nearly broke my heart:

Robotman saw Larry Traynor and Rita Farr, his teammates from the Doom Patrol, picnicking along with their Chief, Niles Caulder. He joined them, laughing as they talked about their next mission and the Maui vacation they planned to take later that year.

Although he could not say anything to his friends, Robotman had not seen them for nearly seven years. The others had died during the mission just after the one they were planning. They had sacrificed their lives then so a handful of strangers could live. Hiding his tears, Robotman raised a glass to toast his friends, savoring the little time together they would have.

I looked to find Iris somewhere on one of those screens, though I knew she would not be shown to me.

I saw children reunited with long-dead parents, and figures from the past huddled with awestruck historians. How many questions would be answered now? How many broken hearts mended?

Alexander Luthor Earth—3

Alex worked alone, typing at the keyboard in the cramped laboratory the Monitor raised him in.

He entered the data knowing he'd been lying to Harbinger. He cursed himself, but the Monitor's orders were specific: Lyla would do anything to stop Alex if she learned his plan. At any rate, plan-B—*he laughed as he said that aloud*—would only be used if all else failed.

He felt a breeze behind him even though that was impossible herein the sealed environment of the satellite. He looked around but nobody was there. *Guilt. That's what it is. This is what I get for doing something I shouldn't be doing.*

Several dozen faces scrolled up the computer screen. He only required a few of them but he needed to choose carefully.

Alex made his choices—so much for what Harbinger thought he was working on—then he returned to the virtual model he'd been constructing. His containment suit, preventing the positive matter side of him from touching his antimatter half was functioning perfectly. As expected, the Monitor had done his job right.

The Monitor needed Alex because in all of history only his body had ever safely contained that impossible mix of those opposing forces.

If the Monitor's machines failed, he would focus his combined power to open a tunnel between the final three universes. He would then draw them into him the way the Monitor had with Earth-1 and Earth-2.

Alex knew he would die, but the five remaining universes would, at least temporarily, be safe. Harbinger, Pariah, and their ghostly visitor—although the Monitor assured him he was there, Alex had yet to see him—would then have time to stop the Anti-Monitor and save the multiverse.

There were so many possibilities for failure, but if five universes could be saved, then his life, however short it may have been, would be worth sacrificing.

Besides, although he looked to be twenty-five now, he had been born only two weeks ago.

Alex laughed. He hadn't had time to become all that attached to life yet.

Harbinger, watching the rows of view screens, looked around and wondered why Alex hadn't yet returned. It shouldn't be that difficult to check the Monitor's digital notes and select the heroes needed to save the final three Earths.

She tapped her keyboard and located him. He was in the old laboratory, the one in which the Monitor raised him. Why was he there and not on the bridge?

Harbinger closed her eyes and concentrated. A second form rose from her, not corporeal as the original; she had learned her lesson. This time her replicate would remain intangible. If she couldn't be touched, she couldn't be taken over.

Her doppelganger lowered itself through the satellite floor and made its way invisibly to the old lab. She entered the room, breezing past Alex.

He turned to her. Did he sense her presence? But his eyes swept past where she stood then returned to his work.

"Plan-B." He giggled as he said it. The doppelganger looked over Alex's shoulder and saw what he was working on.

Worse, she understood what he was planning. Her other self had to know.

She turned and floated upward. She passed through the ceiling and returned to her original body.

Forty-five

On the view screens I saw that the Earths were now one-third merged. Once their solid masses completely joined, their combined existences would shatter both worlds.

I knew that same scenario would be duplicated with every world that had an other-dimensional double. The chain reaction of two universes merging would cause the immediate destruction of both.

Harbinger shuddered—I thought I saw her body shimmer—then, looking even grimmer than before, she turned away from the view screens. What had happened?

She paced the room then angrily slammed her fist into a wall. "Damn you, Alex," she said before taking her seat again.

She hit the keyboard, with a vengeance this time. *What happened?*

"You don't know what you're doing. This isn't your decision to make." I had no idea what she was entering on the keyboarding.

She clicked on a toggle and the view screen images changed from panoramic snapshots to close ups of the Monitor's warriors. They stared at us; the transmission obviously went both ways.

"Do you understand what's going on now?" Harbinger asked. She didn't wait for an answer. "So what have you decided?"

The voices came from all the screens at once. There was no dissension, not even, as expected, from the villains. The answer—and I think it startled even some of them—was an overwhelming yes.

They not only understood the crisis, they were all anxious to help stop it.

This was, I realized, a moment of history perhaps greater than any I'd witnessed to this point. Heroes and villains, from the past, present and

future, many of them enemies, vowed to join together as the most powerful force the universe had ever known.

Alexander Luthor re-entered the room. She glared at him. "Do you have the list?" her voice was cold and snappish.

He nodded. "Give it to me," she said.

I began to wonder if she'd been possessed again.

A dozen or so heroes and villains—from now on I think I should call them all heroes; anyone putting their lives on the line to save the universe deserved that—suddenly appeared in the room.

Why did she bring only a handful on board? What was she planning for the others?

Harbinger turned back to the view screens as the heroes waited to hear what they were supposed to do next.

"The antimatter cloud is moving toward the final three universes," she began. "The crux points of the attacks are, as they were before, the now finite Earths. Before we can save your worlds, we need to save theirs."

Starfire interrupted. "Wait. I don't like this. I'm not a scientist, but I think this is wrong. Our worlds are still in danger. What I saw on Earth was horrible. We should help our own planets first."

Starfire stood over six foot one and had wide green eyes and flawless golden skin. To say she was gorgeous would be a terrible understatement.

Starfire, her real name was Koriand'r, somehow exuded both a raw sexuality and a sweet innocence at the same time. There was absolutely no pretense to her and because she actually seemed to care about you, you unbelievably forgot what she looked like and quickly wanted to become her friend. Iris, who had interviewed with disdain nearly all of the world's most highly paid super-models, took to her instantly.

And even more amazingly, you wanted to be her protector. Not that she needed protection.

Starfire was a member of an alien race of warriors. I'd seen her in action and wasn't sure that even Wonder Woman could take her in a fair fight. Pretty and powerful, a deadly combination.

Nightwing, the leader of the Titans, was on one of the view screens and I noticed her face brighten when she spotted him. Wally told me she'd been in love with him from the day she first fell to Earth. But the idiot—Wally called him that, not me—rarely responded in kind.

"I'm not leaving Earth to go elsewhere," she said. Her eyes never left Nightwing. "We're needed here."

Before he moved out on his own and changed both his uniform and hero name, Nightwing had been Robin, the Batman's first kid partner. With Batman as his surrogate father it was amazing he had any emotions left at all.

Then I thought about how long it took for Iris and me to get together. If Starfire and Nightwing were meant to be it would eventually happen.

Harbinger glared at her. "Why are you arguing with me? I know what I'm..." she stopped in mid-sentence, rethinking. I saw her eyes imperceptibly dart to Alex, then turn back to Starfire. Her face softened as she continued. "We need the energies of all five universes. Without it we won't have the power to resist."

Starfire was about to reply when she stumbled back, out of control. Her hand grabbed the wall for support. A second later, Harbinger was on the floor. Alexander Luthor was struggling back to his feet.

I hadn't felt the vibrations pulsing through the Monitor's satellite or the sudden jolt that had sent everyone sprawling.

But I certainly saw Pariah react.

"The evil has found us," he shouted. "Is another universe about to be destroyed?" His eyes unfocused as if he was looking at sights and horrors that were not in front of him. *What happened to him? What was he seeing?*

It took less than a second for his trance to fade, but it seemed to me, who was watching every nanosecond of whatever had possessed him, to take nearly forever.

"We must leave this place now."

I saw the walls begin to wobble and break apart. The vibrations must have been terrible. Harbinger was thrown again, unable to stop herself from sliding across the room.

The steel walls peeled away in front of me, exposing the limbo whiteness beyond. A dark blue flame surrounded us. I held my breath, expecting the vacuum to kill me, but I realized almost instantly how foolish that was.

Pariah looked afraid. "The Anti-Monitor. He's found us. He's attacking."

Alexander grabbed Harbinger. "We've got to go now." Harbinger pulled free and lunged for the keyboard, which had fallen to the floor.

"Not yet," she said. "I can't. Not now."

Pariah fell and Alex reached to take his hand. The vibrations jostled them again, pushing them apart. Pariah stretched. Their fingers finally meeting, they grabbed onto each other like the jaws of a trap.

Alex pulled Pariah closer then grabbed his wrist. All Alex had to do now was brace himself and pull.

The satellite was hit again with another powerful blast. Walls disintegrated. The floor began to evaporate.

Alex wedged his feet under one of the fallen computer terminals and pulled hard. Pariah's weight resisted him, but Alex would not give up. As soon as he could, he grabbed Pariah's wrist with both hands and pulled again.

Suddenly, all the weight anchoring him disappeared. Alex fell back, tumbling to the floor. He looked around, trying to figure out what had happened.

The answer, unfortunately, was too simple.

Pariah had disappeared.

Another universe was about to die.

Forty-six

As the satellite crumbled around us, Alexander Luthor struggled across the room. Another blast shook the satellite, destroying decks five through eight. Alex forced himself into the computer chair bolted to the work station, now lying angled on its side.

"I have no choice," he said as he entered data faster than any eye but mine could follow.

Harbinger saw what Alex was doing. "Alex, no. *Don V* She flew across the room as the satellite shook again. Debris dropped from the ceiling.

I was sure she was being controlled. I ran—the debris fell through me—and when I reached her, intending to push her away from Alex, I was unable to stop and instead sped through her as if she wasn't there.

"Alex, I already have the Monitor's death on my conscience," she screamed as she pulled him from the computers. "I killed the man I loved. I'm not going to let you die, too."

Alex wrestled with her, trying to break free of her tight grip. "Lyla, for God's sake. Leave me alone. I'm the only chance we have. I just have one last computation."

Harbinger slapped his hand off hers. "And it will be entered, Alex. But not by you."

She yanked him easily from the chair and skittered him across the room like a small stone over a lake. "I'm sorry." She was in tears as she entered the final numbers. "Your destiny lies elsewhere."

I heard a deep hum rumble through the satellite and saw Harbinger begin to sparkle as if every atom in her body had ignited.

All of this happened in seconds.

She turned to the heroes and smiled at them. "Go to the final three Earths. You will know what you have to do."

Without a flash of light or even a sound, they all disappeared.

She raised her hand, transparent and glowing and no longer solid. "Alex, if I survive, if any of us do, I'll explain it all to you." She lowered her hand and then Luthor was gone, too.

I heard a crash behind me and saw the satellite walls and floors were almost completely dissolved. Cold blue flames danced across the decaying metal that remained, consuming it as if it was some Thanksgiving feast.

I turned to see Harbinger disappearing into a cone of swirling red energy, not dissolving as the walls had, but becoming, in a sense, part of it.

She was changing form from matter to energy.

Harbinger disappeared but I could hear her voice somewhere in the back of my head.

She wasn't just talking, she was talking directly to me.

"Your love is alive, Barry Allen. She awaits you at the end of time."

Iris?

I ran for the whirling red glow even as it vanished. "Harbinger?" I shouted her name over and over again, refusing to accept its silence.

"Iris is alive? How do I find her? How do I get to her? Harbinger? Please. Answer me!"

But the red light was gone.

I found myself alone in that stark white limbo staring at the Monitor's satellite, the blue flame consuming its final remains.

Chompchompchompchompchomp. Pacman wins by default. De fault of all us heroes who couldn't stop him.

The Monitor's satellite was now gone.

And for the first time, I actually panicked.

Forty-seven

I tried but I couldn't get back to the speed force and I certainly didn't intend to stay here in this vast, empty nothingness.

I floated through the white for—I don't know how long. I wasn't sure how time was measured here, or even if it was. And if there was no time here, did that mean I would live forever?

I waved a pretend cigar in front of me like Groucho. "If you can call this living!" *Badoom!* Rimshot. I bowed to the applause of, well, nobody. God, as a kid I loved the Marx Brothers. I loved all their movies.

I thought of my parents. Would I be joining them soon? It had been so long since I saw them both and I missed them terribly.

I thought about the lightning and the chemical bath that had turned me into the Flash. I thought about Wally and how the lightning had, literally and impossibly, struck twice.

I thought about my life as the Flash. Man, I could run around the world in less than a second.

Coolest power ever.

Here's an amazing but true speed fact I just thought about: like a hurricane pushes a straw through a tree trunk without damaging it, I could speed up my atoms so fast I could move through nearly anything solid.

I knew a lot of stuff like that.

I thought about my world.

I thought about my friends.

And, of course, that led me right back to the beginning.

It was all a joke, wasn't it? All this time I'd been wondering if Iris was alive and now that I knew the answer I could do nothing about it.

So what did a cosmic rimshot sound like?

I laughed. It was really funny if you thought about it.

Maybe I wasn't as smart as I thought, but even lost and alone with nowhere to go, I didn't plan on giving up.

A long time ago the Mirror Master turned me into a pane of glass and I somehow got myself out of that. I had even been turned into a second rate Pinocchio once, a wooden-puppet Flash, but that hadn't slowed me down much, either.

I wiggled myself through the white to where the satellite had been. I thought everything was gone, but I saw small dark spots here and there with even tinier sparks of blue finishing its late dinner.

I reached for them but they disintegrated in my hand. So much for the touch of gentle Caspar.

I moved on and saw an almost invisible red light string disappearing into a wispy pin prick hole, the last ember of wherever Harbinger had gone.

I reached for the string then pulled back. I couldn't touch it and risk destroying it, too.

"Well, Barry Allen was supposed to be a scientist, so think your way through this," I demanded.

I stood or floated there for another who-knows-how-long until a smile forced its way to my lips. "Duh! You're the fastest man alive, aren't you. blondie?"

That straw through a tree trunk bit.

You can speed up your atoms.

You can move through anything without touching it.

I needed to concentrate. There was no surface for me to play against, but I didn't intend to run. I had to speed up my internal vibrations until my atoms moved so fast they wouldn't damage that fragile red light string.

It's how I moved through buildings.

I could do it.

I could feel my insides churning.

This was how I ran through solid matter.

Nothing was going to stop me.

Harbinger went from solid matter to energy, but to get through that hole I didn't need to go all the way.

I was running without moving.

I was winning the Daytona 500, no problem.

I was Nascar squared. No, googoled.

Although seeing Iris would be a spectacular award, I wasn't doing this for her.

This was for me.

My legs weren't moving but I was running faster.

I reached for the red string, its last section disappearing into the hole. We touched and our atoms merged. For just an instant we were one.

I fell through the string and was carried along with it. This was Harbinger, or at least part of her energy trail.

I fell, tumbling down the hole, Alice's White Rabbit with lightning bolts on his red mask. I didn't know where I would wind up but I was pretty certain it wouldn't be Wonderland.

I continued down the string until I saw flashes of a bright red light coming from somewhere ahead of me.

In the immortal words of Buckaroo Banzai, "Wherever you go, there you are."

Psycho Pirate Earth—1

"Are they dead?" The Psycho Pirate trembled as he asked his question although he immediately wished he hadn't. *Idiot. Dope. Why call attention to yourself?*

But he continued blathering. "I mean, I saw the satellite explode or whatever, but I didn't see you blast them or anything."

"I do not require external weapons."

"Right. So I guess they all bought it? Good. One more for our side, huh?"

"This delays my enemies, it does not stop them. But now you are needed."

The Pirate's skin turned cold and wet. *This is it. Keep calm. Don't let him know you're scared.* "Good. Great," he said, trying to maintain control. "I've been waiting."

That was perfect. I really sounded in control.

"It won't work, mister."

The Pirate, startled out of his reverie, turned to see the Flash struggling against his energy chains. The harder he resisted, the tighter they held him.

"What are you going to do about it, Flasher? Run away? C'mon, you know you're not going anywhere," the Pirate taunted.

"I don't have to. This crazy scheme's over and big shot here knows it," the Flash, snarled.

The Anti-Monitor turned to the Flash as the Pirate backed to a wall. *Jerkjerkjerk. Why did you have to say anything? You don't want to make him mad.*

The Anti-Monitor hovered over the Flash, his cold eyes glowed a fiery yellow. The Flash spasmed as his arteries suddenly compressed, blocking the flow of blood to his brain.

"The Monitor is dead. His satellite has been destroyed. Only five universes out of the millions that originally existed, remain. And I will now destroy his final soldiers."

The Pirate saw Flash's face turn white. His irises already disappeared behind his lids and blood poured from his nostrils and mouth. *No. Don't die. Don't leave me alone with... him.*

He fell again to his knees. *Speak carefully. Calm him down. Don't let him stay angry.*

"We need him, sire. Don't you remember you said he's the only one who can open the way to the final dimensions."

Pirate looked at Flash hanging limp from the energy chains. *You can't die, you stupid idiot. Not now. I'm trying to save you.*

The Anti-Monitor turned from The Flash. His eyes no longer burned with rage. The Pirate watched as color slowly made its way back into the Flash's face. *Thank God. Thank God.*

"You won't regret this sire, you won't."

"Pirate, I promised you power and possessions. I will now grant you that wish." The Anti-Monitor focused a bright blue light into the Pirate's eyes. The Pirate shuddered as cold energy burned through him. "My foe's champions have been sent to protect the final three Earths. You will make certain they fail."

As the Anti-Monitor left the room, the Pirate fell to the stone floor, still shaking from the bitter cold.

He's gone. I'm alone. Thank God. The Pirate lay still for several minutes, huddling fetal-like to warm himself up. He finally forced himself to his feet and turned to the Flash, his eyes slowly opening again.

"I saved you, you know," he said.

"You're still not going to succeed. They'll stop you."

The Pirate laughed. "Maybe. But I doubt it. He's powerful. Stronger than Superman and Supergirl put together."

The Flash stared at the Pirate. "You can resist him."

"And die like you're going to once he's done with you? Oh, no, Flash. He's going to let me live."

"Live where, Pirate? C'mon. You know the truth. There's not going to be any worlds left to live on."

The Pirate's eyes widened. *Oh, God. Idiot! Why can't I think straight?* He began to shake. *Calmdowncalmdowncalmdown.* "No, Flash. No. You're trying to confuse me, but it won't work."

"Pirate, for God's sake, just for once, think for yourself."

"I am. That's all I do anymore. Think. And you know something? Thinking stinks. It hurts. Doing what I'm supposed to do, controlling emotions, that's the only thing that doesn't hurt."

He turned from the Flash—*stop staring at me, dammit*— and looked instead at the view screens mounted just above his head. There they were, his assignments: *Earth-X, Earth-S, and Earth-4*.

"You see them? Three Earths, Flash. With lots of little heroes on them. He saved me because I can control their emotions. I can make them think anything I want.

"I don't want to think, so I'll let them do it for me." The Pirate began laughing. "It's gonna be fun, Flash. A helluva lot of fun."

The Pirate danced his way out of the room, laughing and chuckling. *The Anti-Monitor will take care of him. He promised he would.*

The Flash watched him go, then struggled again with the energy bonds still holding him. They tightened around his arms and legs, pulling him forcefully into the stasis chamber.

How long had he been a prisoner here? Does anyone else know he's still alive?

Flash tried to speed up his atoms again, but as his vibrational rate increased, the beams tightened.

He let himself relax and the bonds loosened enough for him to easily breathe. *Carrot and stick*. "I can do it," he told himself. "I'll escape. I just have to figure out how."

Forty-eight

I found myself in the middle of a battlefield. The sky was red, the white wall of antimatter was already pushing its way across the globe. But it wasn't here yet.

This universe was being prepared for annihilation.

The buildings surrounding me showed the effects of multiple bombings. Some were hollowed husks long abandoned, gun shots and mortar blasts pock-marked their surfaces, while others were still in flames, decimated in obviously recent attacks. The soldiers fired at an enemy hidden across the mall near the Lincoln Memorial.

American soldiers, at least I assumed they were from the stylized eagle patches on their light brown uniforms, hunkered behind a fallen mail truck, its license plate read Washington, D.C.

The White House was behind me and looked much the same as the one I was used to visiting on my Earth. But as my eyes followed the long pole above the portico, I finally realized which Earth I was on.

I was staring not at the American flag but a bright red banner waving in the breeze, in its center a white circle, and embroidered in that was a thick, black swastika.

The JLA had files on this universe. I was on what was called Earth-X. After almost fifty years, World War II was still being fought here. This was America but the Nazis were in control.

I ran across the mall to find a half dozen Americans, poorly armed, struggling to keep their positions. One of them was dead and a second was bandaging the leg of a third.

The Sergeant, the name Rock was sewn on his front pocket flap, was on a radio, calling for help.

"They got us pinned. Ice Cream Soldier's down and Johnson's been hit. Tellin' you, man, it ain't easy down here. We need backup. Fast."

I looked back across the mall and saw a steady series of flashes followed by the loud explosions of cannons. The Americans were outnumbered and outgunned.

"Son, you Sergeant Rock?" The voice came from behind and startled me. I turned to see what could only be Uncle Sam standing in front of the Memorial, five other costumed figures, one woman, four men, positioned behind him.

Uncle Sam, at least the one from my Earth, wasn't real, but an illustration popularized by Thomas Nast in the 19th century, and made famous in a World War I recruiting poster by James Montgomery Flagg.

But according to our files, on this Earth he was very much real. Short cropped white goatee, dressed in his traditional red, white, and blue, the stars and striped top hat included.

I had been able to read the adventures of Jay Garrick's Flash because a writer's dreams let him accidentally peek into Earth-2. I wondered if Nast or Flagg's dreams had penetrated into this universe.

I tried to remember what I read long ago in the JLA files. One of the men was costumed in yellow and fired beams of light. I was pretty sure he was called the Ray.

I certainly remembered Phantom Lady. She also wore a yellow costume, what little there was of it. If memory served, she was a hand-to-hand combat specialist.

The Black Condor's costume, blue with a long cape that attached to his wristbands, allowed him to fly, while the Human Bomb wore a silver-gray head-to-toe containment suit that controlled his nuclear energy that could, on his command, create explosions.

The final member of this group, a man also dressed in blue, stood approximately six inches tall and called himself Doll Man. This was too serious a moment to joke, but I really had to wonder if he thought all the good names had already been taken.

Sergeant Rock recognized them and greeted them with a salute. "Freedom Fighters. Sight for sore eyes." Rock pointed to the Capitol Building. "Ratzis got into the White House. Our job's to clear 'em out."

With a thoughtful smile, Uncle Sam looked across the mall to the White House. "Been fightin' this war now for fifty years, I reckon." He placed a comforting hand on Rock's shoulder. "Maybe it's time it came to an end."

To my shock, Sam suddenly slipped his arm around Rock's neck, yanking him back as his other arm snaked around his chest and prevented him from moving. "Bomb," he called.

The Human Bomb removed one of his containment gloves. His hands glowed with fiery energy as he reached for Rock's face. "Yeah. Time the resistance died."

Forty-nine

A beam of white light slammed into the Human Bomb, shaking him, but he stood his ground. The Bomb and I turned to see Dr. Light standing atop the rubble of what had been the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. "Stand down," she ordered.

The Bomb wasn't listening. He turned back to grab Rock. "Now where was I?"

A second beam struck the Bomb, this one was gold and crackled with the power of the sun. He thought it was Dr. Light again, but she was still powering up.

"Up here, mister." I saw Starfire flying over him, swooping in low. She unleashed another starbolt. This one hit him in the face, nearly tearing off his head. "Get away from him," she yelled.

As I said, sweet but deadly.

I wondered how she got here, but then I remembered she was one of the Monitor's warriors. Thank God. I prayed that meant they were all still alive.

Startled, the Bomb stumbled back. He grabbed at his face, still smoking from the blast. "What the hell?" He dropped to his knees and tumbled to his side, shivering in pain. Seconds later he was mercifully unconscious.

I didn't know what happened to him, but I knew the Bomb and the other Freedom Fighters were Earth-X heroes. If they were somehow being controlled we needed to stop them, not kill them.

Of course! For someone so fast I was really slow on the uptake. The Psycho Pirate was controlling them.

Hawkman-2 and someone else, a bird-like man named Northwind—*had no idea which Earth he was from*—streaked overhead gliding on his gold-brown wings. He aimed a weapon which he fired at the Ray.

I tried to stop him but of course I couldn't. The gun didn't fire bullets but a thin beam of light that focused on the Ray. He easily dodged it then circled back, firing his own rays at Northwind.

The bird man tried to climb, but the first blast hit his wings, clipping them at their edge. He staggered back, struggling to regain balance. He was almost upright again when a second burst of light hit him. With a scream of sudden pain, he plummeted to the ground.

Hawkman dived instantly, rocketing groundward in pursuit. His wings behind him, he flew under Northwind then arced up and caught him. He gently lowered the bird man to the ground.

The Ray flew low and carefully targeted Hawkman. I could tell he was hearing voices because I suddenly heard them, too. *"This one has heartlessly killed millions of innocent people. Feel the anger. Let it grow. Let it consume you."*

The Psycho Pirate was giving him orders. *"Destroy the bloodthirsty murderer. Destroy your enemy."*

The Anti-Monitor had strengthened the Pirate's emotion-controlling powers and now he was using them on the Freedom Fighters.

The Ray was powering up, ready to fire another lethal blast into Hawkman. I saw him stare at his hands, tingling with energy as they always did just before he unleashed his force.

A starbolt burned into him. He glared at Starfire hovering just above him, looked again to his hands burning with power, then collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Dr. Light had powered up again. She fired two quick lightbolts. The first struck Phantom Lady, blasting her back into the debris. She scrambled to her feet again, but Light's second bolt hit her in the chest and she fell to the ground, unconscious.

Fifty

We were all concentrating on the battle and didn't notice the massive figure suddenly loom over us. It was Harbinger, but she was no longer a being of flesh and blood, but composed of pure energy. She was at least a hundred feet tall.

Her head was bowed low, her eyes squeezed shut in concentration. She wasn't solid, nor an invisible ghost like me. She could be seen if anyone had the wherewithal or even time to look up. Her lips were moving as if she were speaking.

I saw Uncle Sam scramble for the weapon that Northwind had dropped. Preferring fists and muscle, he wasn't used to firearms, but I could hear the Pirate's 'inner voice' urging him on.

"You see the girl, Starfire, don't you? The golden alien makes you feel sad, doesn't she? You know why? She wants to kill America's hopes and dreams the way she's killed America's boys."

Uncle Sam nodded. "That makes her a killer."

"How right you are, Sammy," the Pirate continued. "So now, instead of being sad, you have deep feelings of revenge."

"Revenge," Sam repeated.

Uncle Sam aimed the gun at Starfire. His fingers closed on the trigger.

"What are you waiting for? We're here for some good ol' American flag, apple pie and ice cream revenge. And who is angry enough to kill her. Sammy?"

Uncle Sam gritted his teeth. "I am. I am angry enough to kill her."

"Halleluiah, Sammy. Kill on, brother."

I screamed for Sam to drop his weapon, but he couldn't hear me.

I hated being this damned ghost. What good was it seeing these terrible moments but being unable to affect them?

I shouted again, not from frustration but anger. "Sam!" I don't know why, but I shouted his name again. "Sam! You can't kill him."

I saw his eyes blink and he looked around him as if he were suddenly snapping out of a spell. "Who's calling me?"

He heard me.

I heard the Psycho Pirate's voice call out to him again. "Sam, you're angry, remember? Don't waste time. Kill the alien who wants to destroy everything good there is about America."

Sam looked at the gun in his hand. "Don't do it," I shouted again.

I tried to touch him when I heard a different voice, this one calling to me.

"Run through them."

It was Harbinger's voice. I saw her in the sky. She was staring at me.

"Run through them? What do you mean?"

I stared at her, still not understanding, but I ran to each member of the Freedom Force and then, because I was still intangible, I ran *through* them.

But I stopped after I ran through Sam. If there was a chance, any chance, I could stop him, I had to try.

I concentrated on getting angry. I let my rage build. I felt something happening inside me. My body tingled. I felt ground beneath my feet. I was becoming solid again.

I reached to grab Sam's gun, to pull it away from him and destroy it before he could kill Starfire.

Before I could, I disappeared.

Inside the Anti-Monitor's castle, the Psycho Pirate stared at the view screen. "Screw me. Uncle Sam's wavering."

He shouted into the microphone. "Anger, Sammy. You're feeling dirt deep anger. And revenge. And hate. Tons of raging hate."

He paused, watching Sam raise the gun again. "That's it, flag-boy. C'mon. You can do it. You want to feel happy again, don't you? When you kill her you'll be so happy you could die."

The back of Starfire's head filled the gun sight.

"I don't want to be angry," Sam said. "I want to be happy."

Fifty-one

I screamed at God for taking me away from Earth-X. Why was he being so unfair?

I was becoming physical again. I could have stopped Sam. But now I was drawn away from that universe without knowing what had happened.

The blackness suddenly divided into two tunnels, and as if through a telescope's lens, I could see into two different universes. Focused in front of me were two Earths.

I saw them slowly coming together; my Earth-1 was merging with Jay Garrick's Earth-2.

I found myself first on one Earth then on the other. For some reason I was slipping back and forth between Earth-4 and Earth-S.

Both worlds had dark red skies and I saw the walls of white antimatter starting to form. It rose up out of the oceans and burned through the waters as it slowly moved toward land.

It was, as they say, the beginning of the end.

Earth-S was the home of the Marvel Family. I had read the JLA files about this planet but had never been here.

This was a world where Captain Marvel, Mary Marvel, Captain Marvel Jr. and several others who fought villains such as the mad Dr. Savana and a sentient, evil worm—yes, an evil worm—named Mr. Mind.

The Marvels' best friend was a talking tiger named Tawny and Captain Marvel himself was actually a young boy named Billy Batson. He had to say a magic word in order to become that world's mightiest mortal.

Superman told me he met Captain Marvel once. Science had evolved on Earth-S as an adjunct of magic and the physics and logics of our universe

operated differently here. But Superman believed that Cap and his family were just like any of us in the JLA. If necessary, they were willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to save their world.

Though they were very different, Superman said Cap's abilities were equal to his own. Mary Marvel and Marvel Jr. were only incrementally less powerful. If, Superman said, instead of being on this separate world they were members of the JLA, there would be no power on any of the Earths that could defeat us.

I heard the fighting before I saw them.

Captain Marvel grabbed Supergirl by the cape and hoisted her to eye level. "Good fight, girl. But not good enough." He shook her, making sure she was unconscious.

"I hear you wanted to destroy my world, you and your friends. That doesn't make me happy."

Mary Marvel nodded. "It makes me angry, Captain," she said. "Very angry."

"Oh, I'm way past anger," said Captain Marvel Jr. "I'm—what's the word? Livid? Furious? No. What I am is happy."

The Psycho Pirate was controlling the Marvel family as he had the Freedom Fighter on Earth-X.

Junior leaned in closer to Supergirl, still unconscious in Captain Marvel's tight grip. He smiled even though he knew she couldn't see him. "You know why I'm happy? It's because I know you're going to die."

Mary Marvel held Changeling and Black Canary by their ankles and dragged them to the Captain. "More coals for the fire," she said laughing.

I happened to glance up and, as on Earth-X, Harbinger's image towered over us. Her head was bowed and her lips were silently moving.

"Run through them," repeated Harbinger.

Mary Marvel tightened her grip on the Black Canary. "Such a beautiful face. I wonder what it will look like after your skull has been crushed to dust?"

Captain Marvel Junior rubbed his hands together as he glared at Changeling. "I'm going to pluck out your heart, green boy," he snorted. "Nothing would make me happier."

The Harbinger's voice echoed again through my mind.

I had done what she wanted on Earth-X. I assumed there was a plan, even if I couldn't see it. I couldn't think about what was happening to Supergirl,

the Canary or Changeling. I couldn't think about what might have happened to Starfire.

I ran, pushing through Cap's body. He shook for a moment, barely acknowledging me, but I ignored him and kept running. I circled around and did the same to Mary Marvel and Junior.

"Now what?" I shouted to Harbinger? "What am I supposed to do now?"

I suddenly disappeared.

I appeared in the theater district in the middle of a large city. The street signs were in English and the license plates on the cars said Illinois. I ran to a corner newsstand and saw a copy of the Hub City Chronicle.

Bingo!

I was on Earth-4.

I remembered just after the Monitor assembled his first army I overheard Blue Beetle tell Firestorm that unlike Earth-1 and Earth-2, each with a preponderance of heroes and villains, there were only very few of them on his home world. I tried to remember their names.

One of them was, I think, Captain Atom. His powers were nuclear in nature, exactly how I couldn't remember. He mentioned someone named Peacemaker and a woman called Nightshade.

There was someone else, too. The Question. Beetle said the Question spooked him somehow.

I couldn't wait to meet him.

By now I knew the routine. Harbinger's image, as before, filled the sky. Her head was bowed and once again she was muttering something I couldn't hear.

She had appeared over the Freedom Fighters on Earth-X and Captain Marvel on Earth-S, so I used her as a beacon. I raced through Hub City, as modern as Metropolis but darker and definitely more threatening. I saw Captain Atom—it could have only been him—fly past me, an energy trail burning the air behind him.

In his right hand he held a small sphere, no larger than the beat-up old Spauldings I used to waste my after school hours throwing against my house's stoop when I was eight.

The only difference being that the ball he was holding was glowing and expanding. Considering what I had just gone through on the other Earths, I took that to be not a good thing.

When the ball grew to baseball size he threw it at a figure running ahead of him. The ball exploded as it hit the ground, just missing its target.

I ran closer and realized he was throwing the explosive at Jay, the Flash of Earth-2. Near Jay were the Martian Manhunter and Katana, a member of the Outsiders. I didn't know who the others were. Jay called the man with wings, Azreal. I assumed he came from Earth-2. There was a quietness about him that made him look almost angelic. I wanted to know more but there was no time.

The last man, I took it for granted he was a man, appeared to be made out of gray stone. His name, according to the Manhunter, was Broot. It couldn't have been more spot on.

The Earth-4 heroes fought the Monitor's soldiers. Obviously, the Psycho Pirate controlled them as he had the heroes of Earth-X and Earth-S.

I didn't wait for Harbinger's telepathic orders. I knew what I had to do.

I ran through the heroes as I had before, though I still didn't understand why. I was intangible. By all accounts I didn't exist. I could run through people or walls or anything solid without mussing their hair. What good was I doing?

I pushed my way through the Beetle and Peacemaker then turned back and did the same with Nightshade and someone called Thunderbolt.

I turned to see a man who, literally, had no face. This was—and I'm not intending to be funny here—without question *The Question!*

It didn't take a second to streak through him, the final hero on the last of the remaining Earths. I looked up to Harbinger's image waiting for some kind of explanation or at least a nice thank you. By now I should have known better.

I waited. Nothing happened. Why was I suddenly thinking Chicken Little? I waited some more.

And then the sky fell.

Fifty-two

It all happened at once: Starfire unleashed her starbolts. Supergirl's heat vision burned into Captain Marvel. Jay Garrick drove a wind-tossed tornado into Captain Atom.

I was in the antimatter universe again. The Psycho Pirate was on his knees, crying to my living self, still held in stasis in the Monitor's machines.

"I'll take all the heroes, your Justice League friends, and turn them against each other in jealous rage."

He stopped and looked to the door. No, the Anti-Monitor hadn't come back. Filling himself with bravado, he turned back to my other self again. "Whatever he wants, I'll do it. I'll do it happily. And I'll do it any way he wants."

My living self opened his eyes and I remembered we weren't alone. Because of the merging universes, time was flowing in a loop. I was here but so were my other dead selves, the mes who had been here before this visit.

I couldn't see them as they couldn't see me. But I knew where I stood.

I reached out and grabbed their hands, and I began to run in place, increasing my internal vibrations as I yelled to him, "Don't forget. Don't dare forget."

I was back in the Monitor's limboverse. Harbinger opened three tunnels and instead of merging with each other, Earth-X, Earth-4 and Earth-S slid into them.

The final three universes were joining Earths 1 and 2.

But the tunnels first led through me.

And I finally understood.

Fifty-three

I had stumbled into the Multiverse by accident.

It was years ago and I was at a Central City charity event for children, performing simple speed tricks. The kids enjoyed it. Actually, they were less impressed than I would have been at their age. *These blase kids today with their Sesame Street and their Pong video games...*

How to engage them? Panicking, I remembered the *Tales of the Arabian Nights* stories I read when I was their age. They'd love that.

Yeah. Right! The same way I loved The Book of Og the 2nd carved into a cave wall or whatever favorite story it was that my parents wanted me to read.

But I was the Flash. I had stopped the Mirror Master from frying Central City under a giant magnifying lens. I had defeated the Weather Wizard when he tried to flood us for forty days and forty nights.

I was the Fastest Damned Man Alive and I was undaunted. These eight year olds were going to like my performance or... or they wouldn't, I guess. What could I do to them?

They watched me shimmy up a rope like an Indian snake charmer. I began to vibrate to become invisible, one of my favorite tricks. I vibrated faster and faster. Faster than I ever had before.

I saw lights. And then, suddenly, I disappeared.

Not only from their view, which was expected, but from the entire universe, which wasn't. I often wondered what trauma I caused those kids when I didn't return.

I slipped through the vibrations that separated the universes of the Multiverse and discovered Earth-2 and Jay Garrick, my inspiration. Later, he duplicated my actions and visited me on Earth-1.

But now Jay was older, still fast, but not fast enough to traverse the Multiverse. Wally was a speedster, too, but young and not yet at his peak.

I was the only man who could move through the multiverse.

That was understanding one.

Understanding two:

When the Monitor's machines were activated before they were ready, he let himself die so his own body could become its new source of power.

Now, when Harbinger needed to move the final three Earths into the Monitor's universe, she knew she needed far more power than even she had been given.

The Monitor analyzed me as he did all the heroes he had brought to him. He understood who I was, understood how I became what I am, but more importantly, he understood how I could be used.

The moment those lightning-charged chemicals worked their way through my pores and turned me into the Flash, everything in my body had irrevocably changed.

The Anti-Monitor was the only one who understood what that change meant.

I had become a source of power and energy that unleashed itself through the speed force. To gain the power she needed, Harbinger had to tap into what I had become.

But I was actually even more than that.

Those last three universes were already being eaten alive by the same antimatter that destroyed millions of universes before them. To enter the Monitor's limbo, the infection had to be removed.

I was not only the battery that would save the Multiverse, I was the filter through which they had to flow.

Yay me.

Universes hurtled through Harbinger's tunnels at beyond light speed. Even my eyes could catch only glimpses of the planets if, by chance, they happened to be angled to reflect the glow of a passing sun.

I swear to God I wished I was blind: All of existence charged directly at me and that I wasn't its final target provided little comfort. To get past me and into the Monitor's limboverse this... *starstuff* had to go through me.

Who in their right mind would want to be the butt end of a cosmic enema?

Even in soundless space it hit with a deafening roar. I was assaulted by every sound on every world from every moment of time. It seemed an eternity that I was forced to endure the screaming cacophony of this insane tunnel of Babel.

I absorbed the histories of more than a hundred billion cultures. I saw endless lives being born, torn apart and die.

Was this how Pariah lived his every day? How did he find the strength to go on? I wanted to scream, to run or to finally surrender to death, but I wasn't being allowed to.

The last of the planets clawed its way out of me and the five universes were, at least for the moment, safe.

I wish I could say the same for me.

As the final ember of a last dying sun cleansed itself of its anti-matter poisoning by passing through my body, I, once again, disappeared.

Was God, at last, granting me my long-delayed rest?

But I didn't see an end. What was waiting for me was the beginning.

The beginning of all creation.

PART THREE

BEYOND THE SILENT NIGHT

In ancient Greece, mortals had come to believe the Gods were immortal. But myth does not make fact. What casually appeared to them to be eternity was still, in reality, finite. The Gods knew the truth, but sometimes even they forgot.

—The Monitor Tapes Vol. 2 Pg. 91

Lyla—Earth—1

Whiteness still dominated the Monitor's universe, but it was punctuated now by a planetary quintet.

Alexander Luthor and Lyla—having expended all her power bringing the universes here, she was Lyla again and not Harbinger—found themselves on a small, floating asteroid overlooking a circle of five Earths.

"We saved them, Lyla." Luthor couldn't contain his excitement as he stared at the Earths, almost identical in their features, but so different in what made up their souls.

He pointed into the distance. "Sixty-four million miles away from us are five Mars and three hundred million miles beyond them are five Jupiters. If we could pull out far enough we would see five solar systems, five galaxies, and ultimately five universes."

Lyla wasn't listening, her mind was thinking of the Monitor and his final wishes. This was the moment for which he had died but what Lyla saw was not his final hope.

She cursed herself again for killing him, despite knowing she could do nothing else, despite understanding his death was not only anticipated but necessary. She felt lost because she knew only he could tell her what needed to be done now.

"We've bought time, Alex. Not solutions. The Anti-Monitor moved too quickly. And again we weren't ready."

"But the Earths are safe." Lyla turned back to the planets, shaking her head, angry at the failure he couldn't understand.

"We slowed down the vibrations separating the universes but they haven't stopped. They're still moving together, and when they finally merge,

everything will still be destroyed. I don't know why... but I was expecting more."

"But we now have time. And we need to use it to our advantage."

Pariah appeared suddenly beside them. "Alex is right, Lyla. For the first time I see hope."

He pointed to the Earths, a circle of worlds beginning their final revolutions. "There was a reason the Monitor selected these heroes. We need to bring them to us again. And this time they need to learn the truth."

"We've always told them the truth," Lyla said angrily. "The universes are dying and the Anti-Monitor is responsible."

Alex nodded, saying, "We just saved five universes. We've done everything we can. There is no other truth."

Pariah kept watching the planets. "Alex, there's always another truth. The truth about the Anti-Monitor for one. They don't know that. They also don't know the truth about me. No one ever has."

"Please. Just bring them here. There should be at least one from each Earth. They can tell the others. I want them to know what I did. And I need them to know it's because of me that all their universes are being destroyed."

"You?" Alex reached to grab him, but Pariah disappeared and Alex's hands were left clutching empty space. He turned back to Lyla, angry and confused. "Is it possible?"

Lyla shrugged helplessly. "Let's do what he's asked."

Fifty-four

Can anything exist before existence?

I would have bet the farm, the cows, and even Inga, the farmer's daughter, that the answer was no. But based on what I saw I would have lost it all. Sony, Bossie. Even sorrier, Inga.

What I saw defied logic.

I believed in God. Not as a being who took on the shape of man and walked, whenever he wished, among us. I thought of him as something spiritual, amorphous, maybe a hope or a dream, but not flesh and blood. God had to be made of sturdier stuff than that.

In the blackness I saw a circle of even darker black. It appeared to be calm and unmoving although it was anything but.

Scientists believed most galaxies contained a central black hole although no photographs had ever been taken of one. I imagined that was what I saw here, a black hole siphoning through it, like water down a drain, everything that fell within its event horizon.

Everything, including time itself.

An event horizon is that space beyond which the black hole's gravity had no effect but which, within it, one would be inexorably drawn to the hole's fatal singularity.

Because time passed more slowly at the horizon than beyond it, I saw all time as one, the past, present and, I assumed, the future. They were, in no particular order, corkscrewing past me, like a falling film strip, each frame a different moment of time, disappearing forever into that dark singularity below.

Improbably, the first thing I saw at the dawn of time, was a hand. A human-like hand with four fingers and a thumb.

It stretched up through the black hole, pushing past its event horizon. It reached into the blackness of pre-existence space.

The hand was open and in its palm was a cluster of swirling stars, a living nebulae in miniature that began to grow and then suddenly explode.

As I stared at this impossibility I had only one question: Was this the actual hand of God giving birth to all existence?

Fifty-five

Under the event horizon's curving arc I found myself walking on the temporal image of a planet far in advance of my own.

I saw cities that seemed to grow out of the planet itself, and the blue-skinned people, tall and reed-thin, were human-like but not human. Compared with them our people were only now crawling out of the sea and forming independent thought.

The images blurred past me. I watched them for a generation and learned their minds were capable of manipulating reality, bending it to their will.

They continually reshaped their planet, which they called Oa, until they were satisfied they were living in paradise.

Instants of time disappeared below me and I tried as best I could, to see everything. But not even my eyes were fast enough.

Who knows how many months or years or centuries I lost?

I watched one of the Oans, a scientist called Krona. He was taller and broader than his blue-skinned brothers, and unlike them, who were satisfied with their perfect existence, there was anger seething just beneath his dark eyes.

"Krona, we have to insist this stop," one of the other Oan scientists said. "The council—"

I watched an argument between scientists. The others were uncomfortable and I think unaccustomed to disagreements, but Krona refused to listen.

"The council's full of fools, and you know it," Krona shouted at them. "What you're asking me to do is stop thinking. And only because you're frightened of legends."

"This is more than legend, Krona, and you know that. Afrahemm himself barely opened that door..."

"And what? Have our lives changed because he dared search for the origin of the universe?"

One of the other Oans, Krona called him Toran, shook his head sadly and timidly interrupted. "We survived, but when Afrahemm reached into that unknown, the Shibborith galaxy, with more than one million worlds, disappeared. Now you want to open the door wider?"

Krona pushed past him and the others and pointed to the swirling fully-dimensional hologram beginning to form in front of them. "Knowledge should never be forbidden. Questions must always be answered. We grew up together, Toran. We studied together. We were good friends. But I will not let anyone, not even you, thwart the quest for the truth."

Toran reached out to his friend, but Krona swatted his hand aside. "Just look. Look and learn."

The swirling hologram took shape, becoming the same Hand of God image I had seen unleash a universe.

Krona walked around the hand, studying it, not believing what he was seeing. "It's not possible, is it? A hand? But whose?"

The other Oans tried to turn away, but they, too, found themselves staring at that impossible cosmic hand.

"There are stars clustered in its palm," exclaimed Toran. "Is this how the universe was born?"

The star cluster grew. I knew what was going to happen, but even as I shouted for them to run, I knew they couldn't hear me.

One of the other Oans lunged for Krona's hologram. He tried to disrupt the image. "Shut it down now, Krona. Before—"

But it was too late.

The star cluster exploded again.

Fifty-six

I fell back and shut my eyes, waiting for the explosion to tear through me. But, of course, it didn't. I forgot I was still under the black hole's event horizon watching events that had already happened in my past, but had not yet occurred in reality.

The images I saw were so old I innately knew that primal explosion had as yet reached what would be our galaxy or spat out that ball of fire that would, in time, crust itself over into the planet Earth. That would happen a million years from now.

I heard a familiar voice. Because of the black hole's mass and gravity, nothing could escape the event horizon, but I knew sound and even light could enter it.

The voice was Harbinger's. I didn't know where she was but I could hear her and the others. While I was watching the actual events, still lingering in trapped moments of time, she was explaining to them what had happened when Krona's door opened.

"It wasn't the end of the universe as the Oan legends foretold, but the beginning of something new. The universe shuddered at that moment and another was instantly birthed.

"There were two universes now: one positive matter and the other anti-matter. But both were equal in fabric and strength. But then," Harbinger continued, "The positive matter universe shuddered again and began duplicating itself over and over."

Her voice faded and I saw the universe become two then three, replicating until I couldn't count how many universes were forming.

I knew what was going to happen next: Violently disgorged, the new universes spun at different rates. Unable to co-exist, they slipped into their own time streams, separated from each other by mere moments.

But, I also knew, these new universes, portioned from the original, were also weaker than the whole. The anti-matter universe was half as strong as before, but the positive matter universe was, fractioned into an infinity of replicates, infinitely weaker.

I had just witnessed the birth of the multiverse.

Fifty-seven

Time was passing, but the images flowing past me were still of Oa. I was watching a trial. Krona was the defendant and his friend, Toran his judge. At the same time, I was listening as Harbinger continued to relate Krona's story.

"There was now a multiverse with infinitely replicated planets," she explained. "But throughout all the positive matter universes there was only one Oa. Its sister planet did exist, but only in Krona's new anti-matter universe. It was called Qward and it was a world as inherently evil as Oa was enlightened."

I knew that when he was Green Lantern, Hal visited Qward dozens of times. I wondered if he ever knew how closely related it was to Oa.

Witness after witness described to the court how Krona had deliberately violated Oa's most basic laws. During all the damning testimony, I watched as Krona sat in smug silence.

Zatorak worked as his assistant: "We all tried to stop him, but he refused to listen to any of us."

Sornin-Ka was once his professor: "I brought him to my library and read to him from the sacred texts of Afrahemmm. He laughed in my face."

"He said he knew better than we did," said Syliph, one of his council associates. "He thought we were all fools. I'm afraid nothing we showed him or said could convince him otherwise."

The final witness left the court and Toran offered him a chance for rebuttal. "Do you have anything to say in your defense, Krona?"

He was quiet at first, but then he rose to his feet, his eyes fixed on the witnesses and jury. "This is all a lie, and you know it," he finally said. "But you've already made your decisions. So go ahead. Kill me and be done with it. But I won't listen to your hypocrisy any longer."

Harbinger continued. "Toran sadly shook his head. He had hoped Krona would admit his error and allow the court to show leniency, but given no alternative, he simply read the jury's verdict. 'Your forbidden experiments created a universe which has already unleashed a terrible, dark evil. For that, Krona, you need to be punished.'"

I watched Toran and could see how sad and conflicted he was. Krona was his closest friend, and the Oans' decision, the first of its kind, was difficult for them all, but more so for him.

He sighed and continued, "Because your crimes could not have been anticipated, there are no laws in our books for dealing with them. We argued for so long, but...." He paused, finding the words difficult. "Death was never a choice, Krona, but I fear we might be condemning you to much worse."

"Say it, old friend. Get it over with," Krona sneered at Toran. "Nothing you do to me will ultimately matter."

Toran nodded. "All right. This is the decision. Your atoms will be reduced to disembodied energy. They will, for eternity, drift endlessly through space. I'm sorry, Krona. But your continued rebellion left us no choice."

I saw Krona give a last smile as if this was the sentence he hoped to hear.

A moment later his atoms were scattered to the stars.

New time-lost images flowed past. I watched the Oans fashion a giant storage battery. In a quiet, solemn ceremony, with none of the grandeur one would expect for an event of such magnitude, I saw each of them transfer to it a portion of their own nearly immeasurable power.

I turned away from the images, but I still heard Harbinger tell the others what happened next. "The Oans' guilt overwhelmed them. They pledged to become universal Guardians, and dedicated themselves to stopping the evil Krona unleashed.

"They created a core of soldiers, each outfitted with a ring through which the stored power could be focused. They called their soldiers Green Lanterns.

"But, unbeknownst to them, as they assembled the Green Lantern Corps to protect their universe, the anti-matter universe gave birth to its own warriors, the Thunderers of Qward.

"They were armored, powerful and heartless. And if the Lanterns were created to protect their people, the Thunderers' mission was to destroy."

Fifty-eight

The moment the Guardian's battery was activated and its power streamed its way through the multiverse, I saw images of two other events set into simultaneous motion.

On a fragment of time I saw a moon of Oa. On it I witnessed the birth of the Monitor. Next to that image was another. On the planet Qward, the Anti-Monitor was also born.

They were, I understood, genetic doppelgangers, brothers born apart. But I also knew where one was willing to destroy all life for power, the other would willingly sacrifice all of his own to stop him.

They were created fully grown, and I saw the moment they each sensed the other. Simultaneously, they unleashed their power across the dimensions. Their battle began.

The Anti-Monitor was stronger than his brother but not powerful enough to kill him. I watched in horror as he destroyed all but one of the worlds in his own universe and converted their anti-matter energy into his shadow warriors.

On his first day of life, he murdered a billion worlds to destroy his brother.

The images changed. I was no longer watching the past. Instead, I saw momentary glimpses from the present.

Shadow demons circled the Earth as the white wall of antimatter swept over the planet. Then I saw me, waving goodbye to someone I couldn't see, as I rushed ahead toward the wall, and to my death.

But where was Iris? Why wasn't I being shown Iris?

I tried to run closer to the horizon's arc, but I couldn't reach it. I was dead and a ghost and the black hole's gravity wasn't pulling at me, but it wasn't letting me escape, either.

Then it hit me. *You're bright, Barry. Bright as a black cloud.*

I'd been tossed to the dawn of creation because my body was acting as an antimatter filter. When the three universes passed through me, and I was still vibrating at beyond light speed, I was literally thrown through time.

As I slowed my vibrations, I was drawn away from the black hole and returned to my own time. I was now on the other side of the event horizon.

I was returning to my own century.

Fifty-nine

I was back in the Monitor's limboverse, as I had become fond of calling it, on an asteroid hovering above the five saved Earths. I saw Lyla. Her energy form had returned to human matter. Alex Luthor and Pariah stood next to her. With them were six of the Monitor's heroes, one each of the surviving Earths plus another, Lady Quark, the only survivor of Earth-6.

Superman-1, my friend and fellow Justice Leaguer, represented Earth-1. Nobody, including the villains, could have argued with that choice.

Next to him was Uncle Sam from Earth-X. He was sharp, funny and smart, and it was obvious he was no longer under the Psycho Pirate's control.

The same was true for Captain Marvel from Earth-S and Blue Beetle from Earth-4.

Finally, from Earth-2, was its Superman.

It was amazing for me to see the two Supermans standing side-by-side. Mine was younger by several decades, and he constantly shifted back and forth, anxious for action while Lyla finished telling them about the birth of the multiverse.

But Superman-2 listened quietly as his mind sorted through all the myriad facts. This Superman, possibly because he was older, wanted to hear the details.

"What does any of this have to do with us?" Lady Quark interrupted.

"Look at the Earths," Pariah said. "We succeeded in bringing them here to protect them from the Anti-Monitor's shadows, but they're not safe yet. They're still merging."

He was right. And when all five planets fully merged, there would no longer be any temporal vibrations keeping them apart. Appearing in the

same place at the same time, would instantly destroy all the planets and all the universes.

"Why is that happening?" Superman asked.

Pariah shook his head. "I don't how he's doing it. But time is running out, even faster than before. If we want to save your universes, we can no longer wait."

"First I have a question," Superman-2 said. "If these Monitors were born millions of years ago, shouldn't we have heard of them long before now?"

Uncle Sam agreed. "You'd think so. Bullies like to flex their muscles even when unnecessary."

"They fought each other for more than a million years," Harbinger explained. "The Monitor knew he didn't have the power to destroy his brother, but he launched a final attack, ready to sacrifice his own life to put them both in stasis."

"Stasis?" Superman-2 asked.

"In their attack they immobilized each other. Neither of them could move," Lyla said. "They remained that way for nine billion years until the Anti-Monitor suddenly found himself free. Too weak to start the fight again, he fled back to his universe."

"What freed him?" Superman-2 asked.

Pariah lowered his hood as he turned to the others. His eyes were dark and filled with pain. "I did. And that is one of the three sins for which I must atone."

Sixty

Before anyone could stop her, Lady Quark grabbed Pariah by the throat and pushed him to the rocky ground. "My husband and daughter are dead because of you?"

Her hand began to glow. Quark's power let her harness nuclear energy and she was ready to unleash it all into Pariah. He said he couldn't be killed, and for all I knew he might be right, but I also knew a nuclear explosion on this small asteroid would kill most of the others.

As I reached for her, Superman-1 took her arm and gently pulled her away. "The Anti-Monitor's our enemy, not Pariah. I think you should calm down and listen to him." His voice was non-threatening, but also firm.

She turned, ready to release her blast into Superman, but her anger quickly faded. "All right, I'll hear him out. Now take your hands off me."

Superman let go of her. She backed away from the others, but continued glaring at Pariah.

"Lady Quark, I wish your power could kill me," Pariah said as he touched the burn marks on his neck. In seconds they scabbed over, then disappeared altogether. "But they can't, nor could all the power of these assembled heroes."

"Is that a threat?" Lady Quark barked.

He shook his head. "Sadly, no. I've longed for death millennia before you were born. But it's always been denied me."

His gaunt face sagged as if too many terrible memories finally took their toll. "You're staring at me like I'm insane, and I wish to God I was. At least then my life would one day be over. But I'm not and it never will be."

He knew they were confused so he paused and started again. "Let me explain by taking you back to my world," he said. "I've been told it was

beautiful... green, lush, with clear green skies and crystal pure oceans. Perhaps one of the most beautiful in the universe. But I didn't care about beauty then.

"I was a scientist and I created miracles. I controlled the weather. I eliminated disease. There was no hunger anywhere. I made our world glorious, and because of that they worshipped me, but never enough in my mind."

He gave a bitter laugh. "You see, I was arrogant then, too." He didn't want to go on, but Lyla took his hand. "The Monitor told me.... I can tell them for you."

He shook his head, "No. this is something I have to do."

He breathed in deeply then continued. "With all my world's problems solved, I proceeded to explore the planets. I discovered the multiverse, and though I didn't know he existed, like Krona, I sought its darkest secrets.

"Lyla told you how the Oans tried to stop Krona, well, my world's science council tried to stop me, too. But of course, like Krona, I wouldn't listen. 'You can't put limits on me. The truth must always be known.' I was so sure of myself I wasn't about to listen to their paranoid concerns.

"They threatened to arrest me, but I pursued my research anyway and the hell with the consequences.

"I had already discovered the multiverse as well as the antimatter universe. My genius let me link the origin of one with the other. Now I was ready to investigate how they all began."

Captain Marvel interrupted. "You saw the hand, too? The one from the black hole?"

"Eventually. But before then I built an antimatter protection chamber. I was much smarter than Krona. I understood the possible dangers and knew I needed to protect myself.

"I built it in the antimatter universe, certain from inside it I could safely observe the origin of all creation."

Pariah turned to Captain Marvel and gave a tired, defeated smile. "Yes, I was smarter than Krona. And because I was, my crimes are far worse."

His voice trailed as he turned back to the Earths. He stared at them as he continued. "So there I was, safe inside my chamber and I watched the chaos of pre-existence churn and froth as the birthing process began.

"I saw the hand, and yes, it was the very same one Krona saw. It rose from the swirling darkness, its open palm burned with an energy I thought no living eyes but mine had ever seen."

Pariah turned to the others then lowered his head. His voice grew faint

and I could barely hear him. "The greatest scientist on my world, they called me, but I was an idiot. In my chamber I protected myself but took no precautions to save anyone else.

"The first of my three sins. When I opened the portal between the universes, when matter and antimatter touched, even for that single moment, I unleashed a ferocious explosion that rippled out in all directions.

"In that terrible instant, I destroyed my universe."

Sixty-one

Pariah fell silent. Suddenly, his eyes rolled into their sockets and he slumped unconscious into Lyla's arms. I saw Superman-1 rush to help, but she waved him away. "I can take care of him."

She held onto him and tenderly stroked his face. She felt some of her power still inside her and she passed it to him. "Rest," she said.

When his eyes finally opened I saw they were red with tears. "I killed them all," he whispered hoarsely. "I killed everyone."

"You couldn't have known," Lyla soothed.

His voice dropped to a trembling whisper. "But I *should* have, Lyla," he answered.

He sat down and stared solemnly at the ground. With his index finger he stirred up some dust and watched it blow away into space.

"As if destroying my own universe was not enough, God had only just begun to toy with me." Pariah looked to Lyla. She kneeled beside him and took his hand, and held onto him while he continued.

"When my positive matter universe was destroyed the antimatter universe expanded to fill the void. And when it did, it freed the Anti-Monitor from his nine billion year sleep. Giving him life again was my second sin.

"But my third sin was the most terrible of all. You see, because of me he realized that as each positive matter universe died, his antimatter universe would absorb its energies and he would grow even stronger.

"Because of me, the destruction of the multiverse began. An infinity of universes have suffered for my sins."

He looked at Lady Quark, standing silent and horrified. "So, do I want you to kill me and put me out of my horrible misery? Yes. Of course the answer is yes. But I was changed in that explosion, Lady Quark. And as

much as I wish otherwise, I can no longer die.

"You'd think all that was enough. But no. God still had plans for me. The price of arrogance had not been paid. Not only can't I die, but before the Anti-Monitor destroys each new universe, I am brought there to witness its destruction. I'm forced to watch the deaths of innocent people.

"Those are my sins, Lady Quark. And these are my punishments."

I know I was feeling the same horror as the others. There was no way for any of us to say "I understand," because none of us could. Pariah was sadly alone and worse, he knew it.

Superman-2 sat down next to him. He looked at the Earths and not Pariah. "You're right, you know. Your sins were terrible. And maybe because of them the Anti-Monitor destroyed all those other universes. And it might not make any difference to you, but what happened in the past is over with. We've now got other concerns."

Pariah snorted. "Like what?"

Superman pointed to the Earths. "You said the planets were merging faster than before. That means there's still billions of people on those Earths."

"What Superman's saying," Uncle Sam interrupted, "is maybe you are suffering and maybe that's your lot. But self-pity's not helping us save what's left."

I winced as I heard Blue Beetle cough as if he was about to say something stupid. But Sam continued.

"This is the time I reckon we band together. We get us that army the Monitor assembled and bring this fight to the Anti-Monitor. You folks agree?"

No one, not even Lady Quark, who was still glaring at Pariah, dissented.

Sixty-two

Supergirl and Wonder Woman were brought to the limboverse asteroid as were Captain Atom, Firestorm, Green Lantern-2, and several others.

Of course there was still one problem:

I could move between universes—it's how I got involved with this insanity in the first place—but how were they going to travel to the antimatter universe?

I was pretty sure Mapquest wasn't going to be much of a help. Starting address: The limboverse. Destination address: The corner of death and destruction. I don't know the zip code.

"So how do we get to the Anti-Monitor?" Captain Marvel asked.

I'd say great minds think alike, but since Captain Marvel was actually a little kid, what did that say about me?

He pointed to Pariah. "You travel between universes, don't you?"

Pariah nodded. "I can open the portal, but the antimatter would destroy you. But, Alexander...."

I turned to Alex who now looked to be in his early thirties. "I'd survive," he said. "But I'm not sure if I can protect you. If anything went wrong..."

Uncle Sam rest his hand on Alex's shoulder. "Something goes wrong, we die. But if we do nothing, we're sure to die. Six of one, half dozen of another, Alex."

Blue Beetle raised his hand. I wasn't in the mood for jokes, but he surprised me. "Alex, we've got nothing to lose, and five universes to gain. I think I'm speaking for everyone when I say it's worth the risk."

Pariah agreed. "To do this right, Alex and I have to work together. You ready?"

Alex barely smiled but nodded, yes.

This was it. If all went well we were on our way to become Indiana Jones, the Magnificent Seven, and the Terminator all wrapped into one. Showtime!

Sixty-three

Alex removed his containment suit. Spirals of antimatter mixed with his positive matter body. "The Monitor said I can control my energies. For all our sakes, pray he was right." He closed his eyes and concentrated, drawing on his powers.

At the same time, Pariah started to open the portal between the universes. His normal power only let him open it enough to let himself slip through, but now he was being accompanied by nearly two dozen others.

The doorway began to glow. "Alex, now," Pariah screamed. "I can't keep it open long."

Suddenly, Alex's body erupted with energy. It circled him then spread out to the others, wrapping around them as well.

He held his hands toward the glowing doorway and more energy surged from his fingers. The narrow portal ripped open as he created a tunnel into the antimatter universe.

The heroes entered quickly, disappearing into the roiling energies. I followed them inside.

Pariah looked back at the others and I saw him smile for the first time. He whispered something to himself. Busy body that I was, I made my way to his side.

"This is why you brought me to you, isn't it?" He was talking to the Monitor.

"I unleashed the demon, and now I'm leading your warriors into battle against him. If this is my atonement, I give you my thanks and my life."

From the outside this all could have looked like Moses had separated the Red Sea and the Israelites were struggling their way toward freedom. But I knew better.

We weren't marching to the promised land. We were rushing into hell.

Sixty-four

We were inside a tunnel, and its walls were composed of shifting patterns of colors.

The name Roy. G. Biv sprung to mind. I'd read it years ago in one of the science pages from my old comics. It was a fun mnemonic device to help remember the colors of the rainbow: *Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Blue. Indigo and Violet.*

Little throwaway facts like that, gleaned pouring through those old, yellowed pages, accumulated in my subconscious, and unwittingly guided me through school. Because of them I became fascinated with science, and that had directly led me to my career.

I was sure the people who wrote them had no idea the impact they had and I wished when I was a kid I had written a letter thanking them. Because of what they wrote and drew I became the person I am today.

The tunnel walls changed colors as we moved deeper through it. Red faded seamlessly into orange, orange into yellow, and so on, shuffling their way through the color spectrum in endless variation.

Other than the shifting colors, I felt no other sensations. I had expected extreme heat, or bitter cold, some sort of sensation at the very least, but the tunnels were as calm as the eye of a hurricane. Of course that didn't bode well for what was waiting immediately outside.

I saw a white light in the distance. Pariah must have seen it, too. "Our destination," he said. "I can feel its evil from here."

Suddenly, the light rushed at us and we found ourselves propelled like bullets headlong into the antimatter universe.

I braced myself for imminent danger, but nothing came. There was no hurricane to assault us with its fury. I should have been relieved, instead I felt bizarrely disappointed.

We were staring at a black star, at least a hundred million miles away. but we could feel its burning touch even from here. Closer to us was the antimatter universe's sole planet, green and glowing ominously.

"Qward," Pariah said. "Where the Anti-Monitor was born."

From the emerald color I expected to find lush vegetation covering it. but the green was, Pariah explained, poisonous gases that circled Qward just beneath its mesosphere.

Wonder Woman put on a burst of speed and took the lead. She guided us to just above the gaseous layer, distant enough to be safe, but close enough to observe the world below.

"I don't like surprises," she said. "I want to know about Qward before we meet its master."

It was somewhat disappointing, but the surface was unremarkable. It was a near dead world—it could have been the moon or even Mars. I saw mostly weathered and twisting rocks and a few isolated patches of water.

I heard Captain Marvel calling to the others. "Holy Moley, take a look at this," he exclaimed.

I saw what he was pointing at and I understood his excitement.

Floating in that poisonous band of glowing green gas was a stone fortress at least fifty miles long and more than twenty tall. It had been, Pariah said, carved whole out of Qward's sole moon.

This was the castle I had seen from the speed force.

Its surface was jagged and irregular. The stones were each more than a hundred square feet and carved with hieroglyphics of unimaginable detail, each recounting the destruction of a different universe.

Five squares had blank facades.

Thousands of columns jutted from every surface. The walls were carved, too, but into giant stone faces with red glowing eyes that stared into deepest space. They were ready to defend the citadel from any attack.

The faces weren't very pretty and I hoped we were coming in under its radar.

"We're here," Pariah said. "The Anti-Monitor's castle."

Psycho Pirate Earth-1

The Psycho Pirate felt their fear the moment they arrived in the antimatter universe. But he was also aware of their resolve. The heroes had come, bringing their battle to his master. He didn't know if he should root for them or just kill them all now.

Why were they resisting Anti-Monitor, he kept asking himself. He's all-powerful, don't they know that? He destroys universes. They certainly knew that. None of them have a fraction of his strength. "Why don't you just give up?" he shouted.

He turned to the view screens and saw them rushing to the castle. The two Supermans were in the lead.

Psycho Pirate slumped into a chair but kept staring at the screens. He questioned if there was actually a chance they could hurt the Monitor? Maybe kill him? *If they did, would they free me? Or would they kill me, too?*

No, of course they wouldn't kill him, he realized. "You're good guys," he said as they flew alongside the great stone walls. "You don't kill."

But what if they did, just this one time? He stared again at the screens. Supergirl flew through one of the windows. "Hmmm. Maybe I can make you fall in love with me. That's it. That's what I'll do," he shouted at her.

He jumped to his feet, more excited than he'd been in days. "You and Wonder Woman, maybe the green girl, too. Jade. You'll defend me against the others."

He paced the room, rubbing his hands together gleefully. A hundred ideas pounded their way into him. "Here's the plan. The heroes first kill the Master. Then you girls will work for me and kill the men heroes. It'll be just us then."

He stopped, suddenly, and his eyes widened. He had a new idea. "When it's just the four of us," he whispered conspiratorially, "we'll take over those last five universes. I'll become the master, then. That sounds perfect, doesn't it?"

"Come."

The deep voice reverberated through the room like angry thunder. The Psycho Pirate's laugh caught in his throat.

The Anti-Monitor looked at the castle wall and the stones shifted in response, widening into a circular opening. From his high perch he saw Supergirl lead the others into his citadel. "When did you sense their presence, Pirate?" He asked flatly.

The Pirate fell to his knees. "Just now, I swear, Master. I was coming to tell you when you summoned me."

The Anti-Monitor turned to him. "Then use your powers on them. Turn them into my fearful slaves."

"I can't, Master. Not yet." The Pirate edged back, away from the Anti-Monitor. "You had me control them when they were on their worlds. I haven't had time to recharge—"

The Anti-Monitor's eyes burned with anger and the Pirate found himself flying across the room.

"Then you have failed me."

He's going to kill me. He's going to make me suffer.

The Anti-Monitor stood over the Pirate. "You are an annoyance that should be eliminated. But I may not be done with you yet." He stepped over the trembling Pirate and headed for the door. "If you fail to regain your power quickly I will not again be so forgiving."

Then he was gone, but the Pirate was still shaking.

Sixty-five

I followed the others as we made our way through the Anti-Monitor's fortress. Most of them could fly, but to conserve strength—power usage always demanded a resulting price—we generally walked. For a non-flyer, that was fine with me.

The first thing I noticed was the surprising lack of separate rooms. Stone walls, most between eight and twelve feet high, carved with the same panoramas of death and destruction we'd seen on the castle's exterior, separated immense open courtyards. Shadows clung to the walls in almost every corner, afraid to venture into the open.

The courtyards were empty of both furnishings or design. The Anti-Monitor was obviously not into decorating. With nothing here to muffle our intrusion, every footstep and nervous cough echoed back from all directions.

We followed the walls as they snaked from one area to the next, leading us around endless acres of stone mazes. On occasion we'd find ourselves butted up against one of the few walls that attached itself to a high ceiling. We would then have to backtrack and start that section over.

Massive stairwells spiraled their way to different levels and there must have been more than a thousand of them, each with hundreds of separated courtyards casting fearful shadows of their own.

The effect was both open yet oppressive.

Superman-1 must have felt that, too. "He must know we're here by now. Be careful."

I followed them as they continued to the next level which featured, surprise, more of the same. More stones. More twisted death hieroglyphs. More walls. More shadows from which things might jump out to surprise us.

Pariah took the lead. "I sense the Anti-Monitor's somewhere here," he said. "Split up. Whoever finds him, let the rest of us know."

He turned, hovering before us. "Listen to me. I know how some of you think, but whatever you do, don't try taking him alone." He flew off and J'onn J'onzz, Mon-El, and Jade followed close behind.

The others split into teams and went in separate directions. I tried to keep track of all of them.

Firestorm and the Ray flew through a low corridor that opened up into a mile-wide square. This area was unlike the first courtyard we had entered. Dozens of stone columns grew out of the ground to support a massive ceiling about a hundred feet over our heads.

Firestorm flew alongside the Ray. They joked as they made their way around the columns, inspecting each one of them as they flew past.

Firestorm suddenly jerked his head to the side. "You see that?"

The Ray laughed. "Boogeyman?"

"If only. I thought I saw a shadow."

"Probably did. Ours."

Firestorm laughed nervously. "Yeah. Must be it." He didn't sound convinced.

They flew on but for some reason I hesitated. I heard a grinding clatter behind me. Firestorm was right. The shadows were moving.

Stone blocks yanked themselves from the walls, combined with others, then reshaped themselves into giant rock monsters. I heard their steps pound on the stone floor long before any of us saw them.

We hadn't found the Anti-Monitor but we were already under attack.

Sixty-six

I faced between the different groups. Unable to help them, it was all I could do.

Superman-1, fingers clasped together in front of him, forming a two-handed fist, flew at the nearest beast like a human bullet. "There's no heart beat," he shouted. "They're not alive."

Wonder Woman hovered above a second creature. Her lasso looped around its neck. "This is war, Superman. I wouldn't care if they were." She flew up, arced over a wall, and then pulled down hard on her lasso.

The stone beast's head cracked at the throat. The body fell to the ground, shattering.

"For some of us, it matters." Superman crashed through the creature, pulverizing its chest. As the stone chunks fell to the ground Superman used his super-breath to scatter them into space.

He turned to Wonder Woman and grinned. "Next?"

When I was younger and new to the Justice League, I always assumed Superman and Wonder Woman would eventually become an item, the perfect couple. It seemed logical to most of us that they were the match made in super-hero heaven. But back then I was still a bit star struck and I never saw their glaring differences.

Amazons were raised to be warriors and hunters. Before they fled Greece and founded Themyscira, Diana's mother, Hippolyta, had been the fiercest warrior of them all. She was the Queen who proudly led the bloody invasion of Attica and Athens. She was the warrior who always claimed success.

Wonder Woman told me many times that she rebelled against much of the Amazon philosophy, especially their hatred of men. But I always knew she was, in her heart, still an Amazon. When it came to battle she believed in winning at all cost.

Superman could never agree with that philosophy. The heart of Clark Kent may have been born on a distant planet, but it had been nurtured in Smallville. Killing was not only not an option, the thought would never be considered.

I often saw them sitting around the JLA conference table, Diana drinking tea, Superman sipping from a can of soda, joking and laughing as they described their latest adventures. But had they been attracted to each other, which I don't believe they ever were, there was always a very visible gulf between them.

I went back to find Firestorm and the Ray teamed to destroy their targets, two creatures, each at least twenty feet tall, much bigger than Superman and Wonder Woman's.

They flew between the beasts and simultaneously fired at the closest. Their blasts merged into a single beam and struck it where, were the thing alive and human, its heart would normally be. The creature shook for several seconds before it exploded.

Firestorm smiled at the Ray. "Seconds?"

"Lead on, McDuff." The Ray responded.

"That's 'Lay on,' not lead on." Firestorm said. "High school english. Last semester. I can't add two numbers together, but *that* I remember. Go figure."

I raced into another of the Monitor's rooms and saw Dr. Light on the ground, her uniform torn. She was bruised and clutching her stomach. I looked up just as one of the creatures pummeled its massive stone fist into Supergirl.

I could see she was stunned. Supergirl should have been invulnerable but she was bleeding from dozens of deep cuts that lacerated her face, chest, and legs.

She was in pain and she tried to creep away from the creature, but it kept battering her into submission.

I knew Kara, Supergirl's real name, just barely twenty-two, was Superman's cousin. Her city had miraculously survived Krypton's explosion only to meet it's own end many years later.

As her small world was dying her parents sent her—now fifteen—to Earth just as Superman's parents had done many years before. Similar beginnings, but there was a world of difference.

Superman had been an infant with no memories of Krypton or his birth parents. He was still a baby when Jonathan and Martha Kent had found the infant passenger of the rocket ship that crash-landed in their field and raised him as their own. His only childhood recollections were of blissful days in Smallville.

But Kara had been a teen when she came to Earth. She saw her friends and family die before her eyes. The baby who would be Superman could never have understood the explosion that reverberated behind his speeding ship, but Kara watched in horror as Argo City succumbed to its final death, rejoining its own.

I can't imagine what it was like for her. Everything she knew and loved died in a single, blazing instant.

Still, when she arrived on Earth she wasn't filled with anger. I still remember Superman introducing us to her just weeks after her arrival.

She had already learned most of our languages and the young woman we saw was happy with her new life. With Superman, she still had family. With Earth, she still had hope.

One day we were on the JLA satellite on monitor duty together. She was just visiting but volunteered to help out when the Atom, who was supposed to share the duty with me, had to return home for an emergency.

I got us some cold waters and we sat and talked most of that afternoon. I curiously asked her about how, despite everything that happened to her, she remained so positive. Under similar conditions that certainly wasn't something I thought I could do.

She thought about it and smiled as she explained. "My father's brother, Superman's father, died on Krypton along with the rest of their family. My mother had two sisters who also died that day. Everyone on Argo City lost loved ones in the explosion."

She gazed out the satellite window at the vast expanse of space. "That's my galaxy. It's so far away Krypton's still alive in the light we're seeing." She pointed to a faint star cluster near the center of the Milky Way.

"You know, I never knew Krypton. But years later I was the first baby born on Argo City. They called me the miracle child." She laughed at the memory, then her smile faded and she looked at me for several minutes before continuing.

"Barry, I know people die. From the moment I understood what they meant, I was very aware of all the memorials around me. But my mother. God bless her, Barry, she said and kept saying until I believed her, that although we have to remember the dead, we can't ever let ourselves act like we're one of them."

But now I was looking at her as she struggled to protect herself from the stone creature. She stared at it and a burst of heat vision blasted from her eyes, striking it.

It fell back as Dr. Light rocketed at it. Her light beams burned into the creature and knocked it to the ground.

The creature struggled to its feet then backhanded her, ramming her into a wall, burying her under the crumbling stones. The beast turned back to Supergirl to finish her off, but she was already gone. Dr. Light had distracted it long enough for her to escape.

Superman and Wonder Woman rushed past Supergirl and Dr. Light, and pointed ahead of them. "C'mon. Follow me," Superman shouted. "The others can handle the stones. We've got to find the Anti-Monitor."

As I followed them I looked back to see that Green Lantern-2 had teamed with Captain Marvel and Captain Atom. Alone, their powers were formidable, but combined, I knew they would easily take down the beast.

That meant I wasn't needed here.

Sixty-seven

We made our way through a maze of stones and found ourselves in an area of the castle where the walls joined the ceiling. There was no way for the heroes to fly over them.

Wonder Woman and Dr. Light were in the lead. Behind them, keeping rear guard, Supergirl flew next to her cousin.

"My X-Ray vision isn't picking up anything," she said. "You sure he's here?"

Superman shrugged. "I'm not, but Pariah is."

"Forget this stupid maze," said Wonder Woman. "We're wasting time." She clasped her hands together and rammed the stone walls. "We're going through."

As the others followed I looked back. The dislodged stones were moving. "Guys," I called out. "Trouble." Needless to say they didn't hear me.

The stones merged, forming into another creature. More stones fell. There were two beasts now.

Superman heard the heavy footfalls first.

Wonder Woman circled back toward the beasts, Supergirl flew just behind her.

"Superman, keep going. We can handle this."

"You sure?"

Supergirl grinned at her cousin. "Piece of cake. Just you be careful."

I followed Superman and Dr. Light through a dozen more walls which ultimately led us to a small pitch-black chamber. Dr. Light's hand glowed and cast a soft light through the room.

We were in what appeared to be a silo. I looked up into its tunnel but couldn't see beyond a few feet. There was no easy way to know how high it went.

There was a well to the back of the room and I heard a steady machine hum coming from it. Superman leaned into it and looked down. "Too dark." He looked directly at Dr. Light. "Umm, anyone got a light?"

I think that was the first time Dr. Light smiled. She aimed her hand into the well, lighting it up.

The well went down about three hundred feet. "Ladies first?" Superman asked.

"Always."

We found ourselves in another small chamber. This one was also empty, but we saw a bright glow coming from another room beyond it.

Sixty-eight

What didn't catch our attention was that this new room dwarfed all the previous rooms we'd passed through. But that was only because what immediately caught our eye was the immense... *machine...* that filled it.

"My God." Even Superman was impressed.

Dr. Light walked around part of its perimeter checking it out. "It's a solar collector of some sort."

Superman looked at her, surprised. "How do you know?"

She pointed to herself. "Dr. Light, remember? Doctor as in my degree. Yeah, I actually have one. And Light as in my specialty. The machine's converting sunlight into energy and it's far beyond anything we've got on Earth."

It was at least a hundred stories tall, half of it was, as I later learned, like an iceberg, hidden below the stone floor.

The solar converter was built in sections. Liquid metal storage tubes connected one sector to the other. Other tubes jutted out from its central core, and connected to still other machines I assumed were partially hidden behind the stone walls.

The center transformer was conical and another huge tube, this one solid metal as far as I could tell, projected up from its center and disappeared into the ceiling, which in itself was nearly a quarter-mile above us.

Around its transformer core, safely imbedded under transparent shields, glowing bands of energy rapidly circled the cone, either providing power to the transformer or acting as a coolant of some kind.

I had to admit this was beyond my relatively meager knowledge.

Dr. Light turned to Superman. "I need to get closer. Got flight?"

Superman smiled as he took her in his arms and jumped from the stone base. Holding her, he hovered just above the transformer's center core.

As they circled it, Light studied the pulsing rhythms within the glowing bands. I assumed she understood what they meant. She turned to Superman, obviously worried.

"I was right. The core's collecting sunlight and turning it into energy. But it's not designed to power the castle. He's using the energy as a time dampener."

When those fake apes in *2001: A Space Odyssey* first saw the great black monolith, they stared at it with infinitely more comprehension than either Superman or I showed at what Dr. Light was saying. What we needed was one of those "Temporal Physics for Dummies" books, but I don't think even that would have helped.

"Again," Superman asked. "Maybe in English?"

Dr. Light sighed. I understood—holding a conversation with chimpanzees was rarely fulfilling.

"All right," she began again. "Pariah said the five remaining universes are merging faster than he expected. This machine is *why*. The Anti-Monitor is slowing down the vibrational rates that keep the universes apart. That is why the merging process is speeding up."

Better. This time we both understood.

Dr. Light's heart was now thumping loudly with excitement. "The thing is," she said, "this science is so far ahead of us we'd be lucky if it only takes us a million years to recreate it. But if I can study it now I could use it to create a continuously renewable energy source on Earth."

Superman-1 shook his head. "I'm sorry, but no. It's got to be destroyed."

"Please, listen to me." Dr. Light angrily grabbed Superman. *Why can't he see the truth?* "Try to understand. This science could have incalculable ramifications. With it we can solve the energy crisis forever."

"And it could destroy the rest of existence if we don't blow it up. *Now*. I'm sorry," Superman said.

He was right, and I was sure even Light knew it. This was not the time to take chances.

Dr. Light pleaded with him. "Just give me a minute. Thirty seconds. Anything. Superman, please... This could end hunger. It could save lives. You don't know what you're doing."

But he did. His plan was simple and direct. He would smash through the Anti-Monitor's machine. He would rip it apart, crush its power source, use his heat vision to slag its steel frame, then use his super-strength to hurl it into Qward's sun. He intended to remove it from existence just as the antimatter wave had already done to an infinity of Earths.

As he dove toward the core, Superman became a blur of motion. He moved so quickly I saw the flesh on his face ripple and his eyes narrow into thin slits. His lips were pulled back into a hideous grin, revealing teeth clenched tight but stained with blood.

As hard as it is for me to believe, this was killing him, but he wasn't going to stop. The device, whatever miracles it might, in honest hands create, had to be destroyed.

He plunged to the core.

But he never reached it.

The Anti-Monitor followed the Earth heroes as they made their way through his castle. How could these fleas, he thought, prove any problem to him? After all, hadn't he destroyed nearly all the positive matter universes? Nothing had ever come close to bothering him. Why should these handful of fools prove any different?

But they had escaped his creatures and they found his source of power. Now, they believed, they would destroy it.

The Anti-Monitor swore that was not going to happen.

I saw the core was a hand's reach in front of Superman. He struggled for it, his fingers just about touched its metal casing.

But then, too quickly for even me to follow, everything abruptly changed. I saw the explosion, but it came from above the machine, not from within it. A heart beat later I heard its sonic boom and then a scream of pain so frightening I actually panicked.

The stone walls behind me crumbled.

Superman was looking into the pit, staring at the undamaged core. He teetered and his knees buckled. I saw his hand reach out to steady himself but there was nothing to hold onto.

I ran to him. His eyes were open but empty. His face was covered with blood. I tried to grab him but he fell through my open hand and collapsed unconscious to the ground.

My God, what happened to him?

Supergirl Earth—1

"Kal?"

Supergirl froze as her super-hearing honed in on her cousin's scream. His breath was labored and gasping. He was in pain—*but how? Only kryptonite can hurt us. We're invulnerable!*

Her own cuts, stinging painfully just beneath the surface, reminded her that was no longer true, at least not here, not in this antimatter universe. They were strong. They could fly. They had most of their powers, but they were hardly invulnerable here.

She heard his breathing stop.

Her mind divided:

Where was Kal?

There was still a final stone monster to defeat. Can Wonder Woman handle it alone?

Why wasn't his heart beating?

The monster grabbed her.

Where did the scream come from?

Wonder Woman didn't see her break free. No time to tell her what was happening.

These walls looked familiar. Had she already come this way?

Were the others safe? Where's Pariah?

A pulse, slow and weak, but beating faintly, just ahead. Thank Krypton.

Why hasn't anyone found the Anti-Monitor yet?

She saw him sprawled on the ground, his eyes swollen, his face bruised and bleeding. "Kal," she called to him as she sped to his side and swept him into her arms.

Kara?" He couldn't see her but he knew she was there.

His head fell back. She thought he was dead but she heard his heart beat again, much fainter and slowing down. She said, "Rest," then placed him gently on the ground.

For the first time she looked up at the enormous machine that filled the huge chamber. She saw dozens of thick tubes branching off from the central transformer, disappearing into the walls connecting to God knows what else.

She heard the bands of energy pulsing below its transparent shields.
What is this thing?

She turned again to Superman, lying unconscious in the same position she had left him. He was still breathing.

"The Anti-Monitor did this. Nothing else could have. You get better, Kal. I'll deal with him."

Superman didn't move.

She felt wind brush past her hair, and she turned.

The enemy was behind her, much bigger than she expected.

No problem, she convinced herself.

"Do your best," Kal-El always told her. And, as always, she whined to him. "Why bother? I can't ever be as good as you."

He'd laugh. She liked it when she could make him laugh. "Kara, you're already better than me. I could live to be a hundred but my heart will never be as open or as honest. I envy you."

She knew he was wrong, of course. He was the ideal she could spend a lifetime pursuing but never achieve. Besides, she knew the truth: he believed in life but she had lived with death.

The enemy reached for her.

What difference, she thought now, could one more corpse make?

"This ends now," she screamed as she rammed into the Anti-Monitor. Her momentum carried them back, skidding them over sharp, jagged ground.

They crashed through one of the pillars and the massive stones crushed down on them.

With a backhanded swipe, she slapped them aside and tackled him again. She heard herself shouting. "All those people. All those universes."

Her fists pounded him, ripping through his armor. "How can you care so little for life?" She hit him again, savoring the crunch of each broken bone.

She remembered how, just after Superman revealed her existence to the world, Lex Luthor had nearly killed her. It was a kryptonite trap with no escape and she had blundered into it without thinking.

Superman saved her then, just as he saved her so many times over the years. She was going to return that favor now.

She knew Kal wouldn't want to know how much hate was feeding her strength, but she could live with that as long as *he* lived.

She stared at her raised fist ready to hammer down on the Anti-Monitor.

When she recovered from Luthor's trap she was certain Kal was going to somehow send her back into obscurity because of her stupid mistake. But all he said was, "Always do your best. The rest is learning."

She was still staring at her fist, clenched so tight the tips of her fingers turned white.

It took them less than an hour to find and arrest Luthor. Afterwards, she remembered asking Superman why they didn't kill him.

"He's evil," she said, trying to make her case. "You know his crimes. You know how many people he's hurt. He deserves the death penalty. Why don't you put him out of our misery?"

Kal hadn't answered her. He didn't think he needed to.

She turned to the Anti-Monitor, lying motionless at her side. His heartbeat was quiet but steady.

"I could kill you and I don't think I'd regret it, even for a moment. You've destroyed so damned much."

She watched his chest slowly rise and fall. She looked back to her fist. *Just do it. Everyone will say you're a hero.*

She glanced at Superman. His heart was beating faster, stronger. She saw his eyes slowly open.

"Kara..."

Supergirl laughed. She started to jump to him, but his eyes widened, terrified. "Watch out."

She fell flat to the ground as a beam of energy sizzled over her head. She saw the Anti-Monitor rise up behind her. "You are a fool, girl. A dead fool."

He attacked with another deadly blast.

Supergirl flew over his head and landed behind him. She whirled, kicking him, but he barely felt it.

"You truly thought you could hurt me?"

He staggered back. Through his torn armor she saw black blood smeared across shredded bone-white skin. *He's weak. I did hurt him.*

His raised hand glowed and a yellow beam blasted from the center of his palm. It hammered into her chest and threw her across the chamber onto the transformer's core.

She groaned and didn't want to move again. She felt heavy and tired. *Just let me lay here. Only a few more seconds. Then I'll go back. I swear, let me just rest and then I'll fight him again.*

She tried to shift her arms to push herself up, but her shoulder exploded with pain. *It's broken. Everything is broken. Everything hurts so much.*

"Supergirl." She heard Dr. Light's voice call to her. Go away. *Leave me alone.* "You're on his transformer," Light shouted. "It's how he's destroying our universes."

She forced her eyes open. She saw Dr. Light across the room. "Destroy it. Superman was right. You've got to destroy it now."

For God's sake stop bothering me. I don't care about this.

She looked back. *Where was he?* With great effort she tilted her head on its side.

The Anti-Monitor stood over Superman. His hand burned with power as it reached for Kal's face.

"It is time for you, your worlds, and your universes to die."

Kara screamed again as she pushed to her feet. *Ignore the pain. Ignore everything.* She heard a snap as her shoulder gave way. *Well, if it wasn't broken before...*

She turned to Dr. Light. "When I move, save Superman. You understand?"

Light shook her head. "The transformer. You've got to—"

Supergirl cut her short. "Just do as I say. I'll handle the rest."

Supergirl closed her eyes and brought back the memories of her parents and the life she had loved on Argo City.

She was flying through the chamber toward the Anti-Monitor, but her thoughts were on her ninth birthday party and the games she had played with her friends.

Her ninth was her best birthday.

The Anti-Monitor grabbed Superman's face. In just a second he would focus all his energy through her fingers and Superman would die.

Kara tackled him and they fell away from Kal. *Now, Light. Do what I told you. Don't screw it up. Do it!*

They rolled across the chamber. She couldn't move her arms—even if she could she had no strength left in them—but she held onto him as his fists continued to hammer her.

He grabbed her other shoulder and crushed it between his fingers, but she still wouldn't let go. Her pain tried to overwhelm her, but she was remembering her parents holding her close to them then kissing her as Argo City died.

Everything till now has been a dream, Kara. Your life is just beginning. Her mother kissed her again then said goodbye.

His massive fist rammed into her side and she felt her rib cage crush. *Do your best, Kara. Just do your best.*

She remembered Earth. It was so beautiful from space. She'd been told all her life that Kal-El was there and she knew she would soon be flying at his side.

"What are you doing, girl? Why are you fighting me? You are already dead."

She felt heat crushing its way through her body. His hands were burning her, but she knew it no longer mattered.

With whatever strength still miraculously within her, she pushed the Anti-Monitor onto the roof of his transformer. She grabbed his wrists and twisted his palms down into the cold liquid metal.

Do your best. Do your best.

He pulled back, finally understanding what she was doing. The bands of energy circling the transformer's core bubbled from the heat he'd been trying to focus into Supergirl.

"Get off me." He frantically tried to blast her away, but she held firm.

Your best, Kara. Do your best.

His own body wracked with pain, he pushed as hard as he could to free himself from her vise-like grip. But she would not let go. "Why?" he demanded of her. "You're dying. Why do you care?"

She didn't answer him. She didn't think she needed to.

He tried to power down, but it was already too late. The core beneath him was heating up. In seconds, it would explode. She had to die and she had to die now.

"Supergirl!" She heard Dr. Light shouting to her. "Don't do it! Let me help you."

Supergirl turned to her. "Save Superman. Get him out of here."

The Anti-Monitor glared at Supergirl. "You turn in the midst of battle? That is a fatal mistake."

She felt an explosion and then terrible, burning heat. The Anti-Monitor unleashed the last of his power into what was left of her, and this time, she knew, there would be no convenient last minute escape.

It's okay. I'm ready.

As Kara's body began the quiet process of shutting down, she remembered that first day on Earth. Her ship had crashed but of course she knew she wouldn't be hurt. On Earth, her parents told her, she would be invulnerable.

In just a minute she was going to meet her cousin. She remembered her excitement as she opened the ship's hatch and flew out to greet him, already dressed in the Supergirl uniform she and her mother had taken the time to make.

Her life on Earth, she knew, was going to be exciting.

Superman cradled her. "Kara" he said. "Hold on."

He's alive. Thank Krypton.

"Everything will be okay. Just stay with me."

She forced a weak smile. "I can't. But I wanted you to be safe. You mean so much to me, Kal."

"No. No. I won't let you die. We can do this, Kara. You know when we work together we can do anything."

"His machine? Did I...?"

"You destroyed it. It exploded just as he...."

"Thank heaven."

"Kara...?"

She was no longer looking at him.

Sixty-nine

I found Superman holding Supergirl in his arms. She was smiling as her fingers gently stroked his face.

"Krypton's right here. I can see it. It's like Daddy said. It's green and beautiful."

Even as he held her, Superman could feel her life fading. I saw him try to turn away but he couldn't. Tears streamed down his face as he brought her closer to him. God knows I knew what was going through his mind. To let go was not a consideration. To let go was to admit defeat.

It was painful to watch, so why did I keep staring? In Superman's arms, Kara seemed so damn fragile.

This wasn't the way she or any of us were supposed to... Stop? Give up? Die?

I wish to God I knew why I was suddenly feeling so lost. All I knew was that this was so far from being right I was in pain.

Pariah and Lady Quark entered the chamber and stood beside Dr. Light. Pariah was looking for something, but I gathered he couldn't find it. "The Anti-Monitor?" Dr. Light shook her head. "Still alive. Gone."

Supergirl felt Superman's tears. "Why are you crying? We bought time. The worlds have a chance now."

"Please, don't."

"You told me to be brave. You told me to always do my best. I'm sorry if I let you down."

Superman's face was a tortured mosaic, twisted in all directions—Oh, dear God, this is the moment I had seen in the speed force—He was in such terrible agony, trying to comfort her and trying to hold onto his own pains not to frighten her.

This was the most powerful man our world had ever known, and it broke my heart to watch him now.

He knew she couldn't see him, but he forced himself to smile. "Let me down? Oh, my God. You could never do that, Kara. You're my heart and soul."

Supergirl's eyes blinked and I think for just a moment she saw him leaning over her.

"I love you, Kal. For what you are and for how good you are. I..."
And she was gone.

His voice was hoarse and graveled, and he had run out of tears long before his screams stopped echoing through this horrid castle.

He sat for a long time holding her, not letting anyone else near. I think he was protecting her in case there was any hope she could, against all reason, somehow be alive. I knew that if they let him, he would have sat holding her in silence for the rest of his life. Waiting. And praying.

Slowly, the others found him.

We'd all seen death before. Too many times, unfortunately. Some in the line of duty. Others naturally at the end of a long and happy life.

But how many other heroes, friends of ours, even some enemies, also perished in this multiversal crisis? Green Arrow. Tula. Kole. Dove. Even Robin-2 died alongside the Huntress. I heard of at least two dozen others and I was sure that was just the beginning.

And there were the villains, criminals we fought time and again who somehow managed to find their souls when it most mattered. Luthor-1, Clayface-2, The Ten-Eyed Man, even the Mirror Master. Loony that he was, I actually thought I'd miss him the most.

But there are some people who somehow touch your soul in ways others never can.

There were TV broadcasts across the five Earths reporting Supergirl's death. Earth-1 already knew who she was and, even as the people feared for their own lives, candlelight vigils popped up in nearly every city in every country.

Batgirl was on the TV and she began to cry in the middle of her eulogy. I had seen this scene, too, in the speed force. She tried to keep her composure, but ultimately she failed. "Kara was a hero without equal," She began. "She was often my confidant and always my friend."

On the other Earths they played video footage of Supergirl's past achievements. These planets had never heard of her before her death, but because of how she died, millions filled churches, mosques and synagogues to say a final prayer.

"She was a hero who cared more about others than she ever did for herself."

Superman said to me long ago that she was an innocent, and people everywhere could see that in her face. Her eyes sparkled with life and her smile was brighter than any lighthouse beacon.

"It's easy to dismiss the thing that made her special, that made her a hero, because, like her cousin, she, too, had powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men."

Superman brought her body to his Fortress of Solitude where he said a special Kryptonian prayer. He had to learn the words and then recite them carefully to keep their subtle meaning intact. I wished I could have been there to hear him.

"A hero isn't measured by her power, but by the courage she shows in living, and the warmth she holds in her heart."

Once done, he said he would take her body to space. Then beyond the rim of Pluto where he would set it free to drift through eternity.

"Let her courage give us courage. Let her love give us love, and let her boundless hope give us hope."

Left unspoken was the knowledge that unless we found and stopped the Anti-Monitor, that endless space and infinite voyage would be very short.

Her death reawakened our cause. Though the others couldn't hear me, I joined them as we renewed our vow.

"Kara is a hero and she will never be forgotten."

Supergirl's death would not be in vain.

Seventy

We went to the JLA satellite in stationary orbit around Earth-1. Pariah was saying something about the Earths no longer merging. Or was it that because Kara destroyed the Anti-Monitor's machines they weren't merging as fast as they'd been?

I wasn't really listening.

I left them and traveled to Earth-1. Cities were in chaos. The Southern hemisphere had disappeared and the wall of anti-matter was moving north.

I ran past Iris's and my old house in Central City's Danville district, still a beautiful middle-class neighborhood filled with 1950s tract homes and a few refurbished townhouses. I didn't intend to stop but I did. I wasn't planning on going inside, but I did that, too.

The house wasn't large, not by Midwest standards at any rate, a little bit under two thousand square feet, but more than enough for Iris and me. The light green paint—I think Iris said it was called *fern*—was weathered and peeling and I slapped myself for never getting around to re-painting it. At Flash speed, how long would it have taken? Four seconds? Five max?

The lights were out. No surprise there. There hadn't been electricity for two days.

Newspapers were still on the coffee table, open to wherever I had left them. I noticed that if all the stores hadn't closed after Argentina and Uruguay disappeared, there would have been a fifty percent sale going on at the Broome Street Mall.

I poked my head through the refrigerator but whatever was in it had long since spoiled. Not that I needed to eat and not that I could have opened the door even if I wanted to.

I sat on the couch—not actually sat; without being solid I would have fallen through—but I approximated that action. I needed to do something I'd done every day since I was a toddler. This was comfort sitting.

Across from me, to the right of the TV, was our fireplace. On its mantle was the old clock Iris and I bought at that Antique Mall we loved to browse through on weekends. Clustered around that were the family pictures: me as a baby, and at two, at three, all the way up to our wedding. Mixed in with those were the pictures of Iris.

She was even a beautiful baby. How did I ever get so lucky?

There were more photos of us on the wall leading up to the second floor, most taken on our vacations. We always found someone to snap them for us so we could be in them together, looking only at each other while some great world monument remained out of focus in the background.

There were more photos in our bedroom, on Iris' dresser and our night stands.

We really had a wonderful life.

I approximated laying down on our bed. I laughed when I realized I was lying on my side; even alone I took my usual place.

I wondered if Mexico still existed. From the speed it was advancing, the white wall should have been there about now. Bye, Cabo.

In another hour or two at most it would begin its sweep up through Texas and southern California. Within a day my world would be gone.

I stared at the ceiling tiles thinking about Kara. She really shouldn't have died like that. It just wasn't right. If she could die, I wondered, with all her powers and with all she brought to life, how could we...

It came suddenly.

I fought the pull. The force grabbed me without warning but I knew what was going to happen. Hadn't it already tossed me like some damn ping pong ball, bouncing me back and forth through space and time?

But this time I wasn't disappearing.

My body was starting to disintegrate.

I was already dead, killed some time in the future in a blast of the Anti-Monitor's cannon. Only the Monitor or the speed force or something else I couldn't imagine had been keeping me from my final rest.

But now I knew time had caught up with me.

Lady Quark Earth—6

She realized Superman-1 had said nothing since they came to this space station. He sat quietly in his chair as the others made new plans to find and fight the Anti-Monitor. But Superman, who seemed the strongest of them all, was not paying attention.

Lady Quark understood. Liana and Karak were dead, too, just like his Kara. The Anti-Monitor had killed them, along with so many others. But all those others, even those from her world, were sadly just numbers and statistics.

Karak was the man she loved more than any other. Liana, her flesh and blood, was conceived inside her and nurtured for nine wonderful months. Quark knew intellectually it may have been wrong, but emotionally Karak and Liana meant more to her than all the others combined.

It was those two deaths she wanted to avenge, not the abstract deaths of billions.

"How do we find him again," Quark heard Captain Marvel ask. "I mean, he could be anywhere, right?"

Wonder Woman disagreed. "He's weak. Supergirl hurt him badly. He needs to get back his strength before he can attack again." She turned to Pariah. "You've known him longer than any of us. Where do you think he's gone?"

"He's not in the antimatter universe," said Pariah, "And your instruments would've located him if he was in any of yours. I'm sorry, but I don't know."

"It can't be over," said Firestorm. "Could it?"

"No, we're not giving up," Superman said at last. The others turned to him, looking for hope. "We're going about this wrong. The Anti-Monitor's irrelevant. We don't need to find him, not yet."

"Are you insane?" Quark could not believe him. "You don't care what he did to all of us?"

Superman rose, holding back his sudden anger. "You were here when death came so close I wanted it to take me with it. I care, and do not for a second think otherwise. But the Anti-Monitor isn't our priority."

"Then who is?" asked Wonder Woman.

"Not who. Our planets, our Earths, our universes. When Kara destroyed his machines, she only slowed down the merging process. She couldn't reverse it."

He turned back to Lady Quark. "We need to save our universes first. Then we can worry about him."

Wonder Woman agreed. "We should take a vote how to proceed. All in favor of Superman's plan...."

Quark couldn't believe him. The Anti-Monitor killed Supergirl. Why didn't he want his loved one to rest in peace?

He was so much like Karak, she thought. Liana was that way, too. But they were wrong. *Blood for blood. Death for death.* That was what the Great Book called for. Anything less would not bring satisfaction.

"Passed," Wonder Woman exclaimed. "So if everyone's ready, let's do it."

Quark watched them scurry about, rushing to put their new plan into operation. The Anti-Monitor had vanished and she didn't know if she would ever find him again.

But Pariah, the one who freed her family's killer, was here, an arm's reach away. And even if Superman couldn't accept the truth, Quark knew *he* was ultimately responsible for Karak and Liana's deaths.

She sat back in her chair and smiled. Let them do whatever they think they have to. But she knew as soon as she could she was going to get her satisfaction.

She would kill Pariah.

Seventy-one

I found myself in the Anti-Monitor's castle. In that same dark, stone room I remembered all too well.

I tried to move my hand but energy chains held them in place. They also bound my arms, my chest and my feet.

I was the Anti-Monitor's prisoner.

But more importantly, I was no longer a ghost. I felt those energy chains pull at my skin. I was real again. I was alive.

Time had caught up with me and I was at the beginning events of my death.

A voice was talking, saying words I heard before. "My God, here I am, the master of emotion. Want someone to be happy. Bam! He's grinning ear to ear. Want him to laugh himself to death? Almost too easy. Need him so paranoid that he kills himself?"

It was the Psycho Pirate. He was on his knees, babbling as he had the first time I was here.

Then I remembered.

When I was a ghost and saw my imprisoned body I was unconscious, or at least pretending to be. I closed my eyes and let go of all resistance. My body sagged, held in place only by the energy restraints.

I remembered this specific moment. The Pirate was going to look up at me. My dead self was about to enter the room.

"I can create any emotion in anyone, Flash, but look at me. I'm petrified."

In thirty seconds the Anti-Monitor would enter the room. My eyes had to stay closed but I was somehow relieved knowing my other selves were with me, keeping me company.

"Conspiring with my enemy?"

The Pirate suddenly froze as the Anti-Monitor approached him. "Nonono. I-I was just talking. Sizing him up. Seeing what makes him afraid...."

In nine seconds the Anti-Monitor would torture him again. I recalled my dead self trying to turn away but he couldn't. And now, even with my eyes closed, with the Pirate screaming for mercy, I all too clearly remembered his terrible pain and horror.

I would next try to attack the Anti-Monitor, but, of course I failed.

Six seconds: I was plunging toward space. Nine seconds: I barely saved myself. Ten seconds: I saw the Anti-Monitor leave the Psycho Pirate whimpering and begging for life.

I knew Hayden was turning to me now, trembling with fear even as he futilely tried to reclaim some of his lost dignity.

"I'll take all the heroes, your Justice League friends, and turn them against each other in jealous rage." His threats were meaningless and sadly he knew it, too.

Was this the moment my second dead self suddenly appeared? Damn it, but I couldn't remember exactly.

"Whatever he wants," he cried, "I'll do it. I'll do it happily. I'll... I'll do it any way he wants."

He stared at me but I still didn't move. If I had opened my eyes and confronted him with what he thought was his private humiliation, it would have driven him totally insane.

I hated him for everything he had done to me, but I couldn't do that, not even to him.

At last he left as I remembered he had, leaving me alone, he thought. But I knew my other selves, my dead selves, were here.

Seventy-two

I made a groaning sound to alert them then opened my eyes. I couldn't see them but that didn't matter. In two seconds they would increase their internal vibrations even as I did. We smiled at the same moment.

"Don't forget," I told myself then. *"Don't forget."*

All three of us increased our internal vibrations. Our bodies were burning up, consuming us, and the heat was overwhelming, but we didn't dare stop.

We knew that one of us, even two, could never break the Anti-Monitor's restraints. But all of us were somehow combining our power.

"What are you doing?"

The Psycho Pirate was back? When did he return? My dead selves had never stayed long enough to know he returned.

"Stop it. Please don't do that. You're going to ruin everything." I heard Pariah shouting at me but I wasn't listening. My internal vibrations were reaching critical mass.

I concentrated. Colors flashed past me and I heard voices. The speed force was speaking to me. The voices said I had done everything they wanted and now it was time for me to rest.

I wanted to surrender to the force, to be taken away and given an eternity of peace, but, damn me, I knew this was not the time.

While I was solid, while I was alive—a condition I knew would last only minutes more at most—I had to take the chance to help my friends save the multiverse.

I felt the energy chains slip off me. I was free.

Seventy-three

Before he could move, I cannoned into the Psycho Pirate and smashed him to the ground. He tried to squirm free but I shoved my knee to his throat and pinned him firmly in place. "You've got a new master now, Hayden."

"No, no, you don't understand." He was crying. "He'll kill us, only not right away. I... I don't want to hurt again."

Maybe this wasn't the way I wanted to be remembered. With all my frustrations getting the best of me, but I wasn't about to apologize for them, either.

I'd been intangible for so long, forced to watch all the unfolding miseries, and unable to do anything about them. But now I could feel his costume scrunched between my fingers and knew I was no longer just a horrified observer.

"You think I forgot everything you did to me? All those emotions you made me suffer? They nearly tore me apart. Oh, fear was bad. So was lust and anger."

I leaned in and gave him my best Batman unhinged impersonation. I wasn't going to kill him, but he didn't know that. Loony is as loony does. "You enjoyed torturing me, didn't you, Hayden? Now it's my turn."

He stopped struggling, and I felt his eyes reach into mine, attempting to exert control. "No!" I shouted. "Don't even think it."

I rammed my elbow into his chest. His gurgled up spit but I felt his control slip away.

"Try that again, Hayden, and I'll rip out your heart so fast you'll live just long enough to see it stop beating."

I didn't think paraphrasing Bart Simpson would make him crack.

"All right. Just don't hurt me. I'll do anything. Oh, God, I'm dead, aren't I? He's really going to kill me." I let him stand up. Whimpering, he backed into a corner as if he felt safer there somehow.

Intimidation Batman-style may have worked, but looking at him lost in tears, his arms folded over his chest, holding himself tightly as he could, because otherwise he was afraid his heart might explode, I knew that could never be my style.

But as much as I hated myself for threatening him, I needed his answers fast.

"Hayden, you can relax now," I said. "Answer my questions. Who's in this castle besides us?"

"Us? No-no. The Anti-Monitor's here. But you know that. There's the Thunderers. He's brought thousands of them from Qward. But he's turning them all into shadows."

"How is he doing that?"

The Pirate tried to turn away but I forced him to look at me again. He didn't want to answer, which meant I needed to make him talk.

"Hayden..." I just said his name and hoped his own fears would get him started.

"The same way he's creating those antimatter walls. The ones killing all those planets."

"They aren't natural?" I thought he'd been harnessing already existing energy, not creating it.

I remembered the speed force and the heaven that would be awaiting me. I could run away now and change my future. *Decision time, Barry.*

"Show me," I said.

His head bobbed up and down. "All right, all right. I'll bring you there. Then you'll take me away from here, won't you?"

"Yeah," I said, meaning it. "Then I'll make sure you're safe."

"Then it's a promise, right? Heroes always live up to their promises. So I know you're going to protect me because you promised me you would."

Damn. Why couldn't I be more like Batman?

Seventy-four

We had one side-trip to make before I made him take me to my final death.

The Pirate brought me to his former master. He was staring at the five Earths, all frozen in their places, and didn't hear us enter.

"I require more shadows," he said. *Was I wrong? Was he talking to us?*

He wasn't alone. Behind him stood several armored warriors who looked like a cross between Darth Vader's storm troopers and Errol Flynn's immortal Robin Hood, complete with leather shoulder quivers. But these weren't filled with wooden arrows. They contained energy lightning bolts.

These were the Thunderers of Qward.

He turned to one of the Generals waiting silently for his command. "Take one thousand. Prepare them for conversion."

He turned back to the Earths. "Let the planets survive. Once my shadows destroy all their life, the heroes will still have lost."

I turned to the Pirate. He was sweating, so afraid of what I wanted him to do he was almost willing to run to the Anti-Monitor and beg again for his life.

"Hayden." He looked past me, not hearing me. I shouted. "Hayden!"

"What?"

"It's time," I said, calmly as I could. "Go to him if you want, but you know what he'll do. I'm the only one offering you hope."

He kept looking at the Anti-Monitor. If I waited any longer he might very well run to his death.

I grabbed him and carried him to the closest Thunderer. "You know what to do," I said. "Don't think about it. Just do it."

To stop the Anti-Monitor I would need an army at my command. Fortunately, the Anti-Monitor brought one to me.

I paused in front of the first Thunderer. The Pirate stared into his eyes, whispering to him. "You hate the master. You're so angry at him you want to kill him. Feel hate, Thunderer. Hate and anger."

The Thunderer repeated the Pirate's words. "I hate the Master. Death to the master. Death to the master."

We moved to the second Thunderer and did the same then moved onto the next. Each Thunderer took just under a second.

Hate. Anger. Destroy.

Such simple emotions. Easy to remember.

A thousand Thunderers attacked the Anti-Monitor with ten thousand thunderbolts. As they removed each deadly spear from their quiver, a new one formed, whole and ready, its energy reconstituted in its place.

Hate. Anger. Destroy.

He fell back, caught offguard by the sudden attack. A hundred Thunderers scrambled over him and used their Thunderbolts as knives. They stabbed at him, each attack more satisfying than the one before.

Hate. Anger. Destroy.

They weren't powerful enough to kill him but I didn't expect they would.

I needed him distracted.

The Pirate and I left. Behind us, the battle was just beginning.

Seventy-five

I rushed ahead despite knowing that was waiting for me.

There was going to be a dark room with a deep pit. Inside it an energy globe was going to be spinning wildly on its axis, a power generator producing an increasing stream of antimatter energy.

I was going to destroy it and as it exploded it would kill me.

Everyone talks about regrets. I had only one. I thought it would be my failure to see Iris one last time, to let her know how much I loved her. But now, with death closing in, I realized she already knew that.

Every day we had been together, even when we fought, forced us to remember why we were together. We were as close as any couple I'd ever known. If she didn't know I loved her as much as I knew she loved me, seeing her one last time wouldn't help.

No, my regret was not knowing if she was alive. If she was I prayed she would continue to live her life and not surrender herself to my death.

But if she was dead, I knew somehow we would be reunited. If it was within my power, or any other power I could corrupt, I'd make sure of that.

We reached the dark room. Inside, I saw the pit and that bright, horrible sphere of burning hell.

"What are we doing here?" Hayden asked.

Hayden had willingly joined the Anti-Monitor even after being told how many universes had been destroyed. He sold his soul knowing his own Earth would soon join them.

He shouldn't have engendered any sympathy. I should have left him to die. But, fool that I was, I promised him safety.

In the speed force I had seen Wally holding my Flash ring. Behind him, pulling at my uniform, was the Psycho Pirate.

"The heroes are going to be coming here at any time. Stay here and tell them Barry said to take you some place safe."

He wasn't listening. He babbled and cried again. He fell to the ground and repeatedly hit it with his fists. "The master lied to me. He promised me a world to rule. But he's destroying all of them. He knew there'd be nothing left for me."

I kneeled beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. For a moment he looked at me as if he remembered why he was here.

"Tell them Barry said to save me," he repeated. "Was that right? Are you Barry?"

"You got it, Hayden. Good luck."

I knew then it was time.

Seventy-six

This was the way things worked: Every time the Anti-Monitor destroyed a positive matter universe, its energies were sucked into his antimatter universe.

The transmitter globe processed then returned that energy to the positive matter universe as a white wall of antimatter. The wall would then destroy another world.

The Anti-Monitor had, in essence, created near perpetual motion: his transmitter created death and death then fed the transmitter. It also created the shadow demons whose single objective was to kill.

His plan was direct and effective and I almost admired its simplicity.

In a single burst, I ran at full speed. With each revolution I kept building up speed. My plan was as simple as his. I would create a vacuum around the globe. When the pressures inside exceeded the pressure outside, it would explode.

I increased my speed and found myself moving through time. I saw lightning shatter the chemicals in my laboratory.

Barry Allen became the Flash.

I saw Wally look at me in surprise.

Batman battled the Joker. They both could see me.

My flesh evaporated.

My bones turned brittle.

They shattered.

My uniform crumpled to the ground. My ring clattered beside it.

And just as I died I realized I'd been wrong.

I didn't have any regrets.

The Anti-Monitor felt his machine die.
He raged and he swore revenge.
He would begin once again at the beginning.

Seventy-seven

*now i am speed
now i am matter
now i am energy part of all
now past present future is one
now i am taking form
now i am darkness
now i am chaos
now i am firmament
now i am earth
now i am light
now i am birth
now infant child adult is one
now i am speed
now i am light
now i see youth
now he is speed
now i am death
now i am life
now i am energy
now i am matter*

Seventy-eight

I expected to find myself in the speed force, joined at last with those other dead speedsters—*whoever the hell they were, would I ever find out?*—in whatever they had prepared for me. High-speed poker games? Fast times at Ridgemont High? I definitely wasn't the shuffleboard type.

But this wasn't the speed force with its shifting lava lamp-like colors and that uncomfortably calming sense of belonging. This was a place of uninterrupted nothingness.

This wasn't eternity.

The black hole was below me, its singularity, as before, was drinking in time, energy and everything between. But this time I was above the event horizon, standing on a wide spit of land floating far enough away to be free of its insatiable gravitational draw.

I didn't know why, but I was alive. Not ghost unable to touch anything alive, but solid, breathing, prick-me-and-do-I-not-bleed alive.

So why wasn't I happy? I had packed my bags, shut off the electricity, forwarded my mail and gassed up the car. I was more than ready to go.

What did I do to piss off God?

I remembered everything I'd seen. I'd been reduced to energy and fell through time. I think I was part of all time which was taking place simultaneously around me.

I saw Wally. Actually, I more than saw him. Those chemicals washing over him weren't a coincidence and never were. Though science says you're wrong if you believe lightning can't strike twice, in this case it hadn't.

I had become the bolt of lightning that turned Wally West into Kid Flash.

I created my own successor and it felt good. Even though I was stupid enough to get myself killed, the speedster legacy would continue unbroken.

But questions still remained: Why wasn't I dead? Why was I here?

On this side of the event horizon space was empty. There were no burning suns or planets. The Big Bang had not yet encouraged its *starstuff* to begin its universal pilgrimage.

I was back at the dawn of time, literally before *'In the beginning,'* staring into the void. That was when I realized I was not alone.

Standing suddenly in front of me was the Anti-Monitor.

Seventy-nine

I wanted to attack, but without looking at me he held up a hand, palm out, and I suddenly froze in position. Madame Tussaud would be so proud of me. But he wasn't paying attention to me. Instead, he stared through the event horizon to the black hole below.

"How you knew I would be here is unimportant," he said. "You're insignificant and controllable." He turned to me then, looking strangely concerned. "But some of the others. Are they here, too?" His eyes flashed red.

I tried not to answer him, but I found myself talking. "I don't know. I don't know how I got here."

Why was I telling him anything?

His concern vanished immediately. "Then your presence is simply an accident." He waved his hand and I fell back.

I thought about trying again to attack, but realized that would be A: stupid and B: really stupid. He didn't care about me and he had already turned back to whatever he was doing.

But he continued talking. "I sought the merging of your multiverse," he said, "to feed me the energies I need. But with the destruction of my machines, you and the others have made that more difficult."

I sighed loud enough for him to hear. "You want me to bring out the violins? I can play a mean chorus of 'Woe is me.'" It's amazing what you can say when you know you're already dead.

He ignored me. My humor gets that a lot.

"You see that?" he said, pointing to the black hole. "Within that singularity is the moment of creation. Worlds and universes will be born in there."

He stared at the black hole like a child does a flame, fascinated by the endless possibilities it offered.

"On the planet Oa," he continued, "the pre-Guardian Krona will attempt to seek the origin of the universe. He will open a portal into that hole, and a hand, the hand of God himself, will emerge."

He turned to me. His chalk-bone face carved into a grotesque grin. "That was history, the way it was. But now it will be *my* hand he sees."

With the possible exception of *Goldfinger*, I've seen too many movies where the villain tells the hero his plans, giving him ample time to escape. Swear to God I didn't think that happened in real life. Maybe ol' pasty-face needed an audience.

He continued, oblivious to cinematic cliches. "In history, God brought forth not only your multiverse but my antimatter universe."

He waved his hand and I was suddenly pulled to him. "But now," he forced me to stare into the hole, "my hand will create only a single antimatter universe. Your lives, your worlds and all your myriad universes, will never see creation."

He turned me to him, wanting me to feel his victory even as he celebrated it. "Had you let me merge your universes, you would have at least lived your lives till then. Now, because of you, none of you, your dreams, your worlds, even those lives, will ever have existed."

He tossed me aside then ignored me while he wait for Krona to begin his damned experiment.

I knew I couldn't fight him alone. The Monitor's heroes had to know what was happening.

It had worked before, so I sped up my internal vibrations again and slipped into the speed force. According to plan I would return to the future and somehow find a way to get the others back here.

What's the worst that could happen?

The Anti-Monitor saw him disappear and a twisted smile crossed his lips. *Yes, fool, find the others and tell them my plans. Then bring them here to me. Only their presence can assure the final destruction of the multiverse.*

The Spectre

Even in the shadowlands of the afterworld, the Spectre sensed the universe shudder and then disappear. Someone was destroying reality, and very soon existence, even his own, would be ended.

The Spectre, white-skinned and green-cloaked, was a vengeance spirit. For millennia he believed his power had no limits. He could walk as a giant and tower over worlds, or he could take on the guise of man and walk beside them unnoticed.

He felt another part of the universe disappear. "Where are you?" he shouted. *"Who are you?"* He knew better than to expect an answer.

He strode over Earth's shadowland, looking at the new arrivals. A hundred million souls were passing through to their final voyage. *How many more are coming?* he wondered.

He recognized some of the heroes he fought alongside when he still walked the Earth. He remembered they were powerful, some nearly as strong as he. If they could die, how could he survive?

The Earth disappeared but human souls still crowded into their shadowland.

Where were they coming from?

He searched other parts of the afterworld and saw the souls of a million different worlds flooding into their respective shadowlands. But their worlds had vanished, too. Where had they gone?

Impossibly, all existence had disappeared.

He then sensed life, a solitary heartbeat where there had been countless lives before. It was a ripple speeding temporally through space. *Where had it come from? Where was it going?*

The Spectre commanded, "Come to me."

Was this the enemy? The Spectre wondered. All he could see was the color of blood.

For the first time, the Spectre felt fear.

The immortal words of Dorothy Gale came to mind as I looked around me, not actually expecting to find myself in Kansas, but definitely somewhere on Earth. Instead, I was running—*alas, not singing and dancing*—into the world of the dead. In toto, too.

The Spectre was waiting for me, six hundred feet tall with a look that said, "You killed my sister, you little bitch, and now you're going to die."

Eighty

In *Cool Hand Luke*, one of my favorite movies, Strother Martin said, "What we've got here is failure to communicate."

I'm not sure failure would have been the right word to describe me trying to explain to the Monitor's heroes what was going on—*inability* might have come closer. But I had neither failure nor the inability to have a one-on-one with the Spectre. He was dead. I was deadish. Close enough.

I would explain things to him and then, in a Patrick Swayze-Whoopi Goldberg game of telephone, he could translate that to the others all the while keeping me out of it. After Supergirl's death, I didn't want to burden them with my—*am I dead or just mostly dead*—problems. There were much bigger concerns to worry about now.

"There are two moments in time that must be guarded," explained the Spectre. "We need to divide our forces between them."

Wonder Woman interrupted. "If the Anti-Monitor's at the dawn of time, we should focus all our power there."

"No, Wonder Woman, you're wrong," exclaimed Superman-1.1 was as surprised as everyone else by his uncharacteristic bluntness.

"Kara destroyed the Anti-Monitor's ability to quickly merge the universes. We know his shadow-demons disappeared along with his antimatter wave. He's desperate and willing to do anything. We can't afford failure."

He turned to Harbinger and Superman's voice softened. "You said the multiverse was created on Oa when Krona opened the portal to the dawn of time."

Harbinger nodded. "When he saw the hand of God."

Superman-1 turned back to the others. "That's the other nexus point in this crisis. One force needs to go after the Anti-Monitor while the other stops Krona."

While Superman-1 and the Spectre explained the plan, I watched Superman-2 standing alone to the side. I recognized his look. It was the same as the one I'd seen on myself when I realized I might never see Iris again.

Captain Marvel coughed, bringing attention to himself. He gave a sheepish smile then addressed the others. "The Anti-Monitor's still our main target, right? So only the strongest heroes should go after him." He looked at the Spectre. "That means you, doesn't it?"

"No," said the Spectre. "I am needed on Oa. I will meet your warriors there."

"But we need..." Marvel reached to grab him, but the Spectre disappeared. "Guess he doesn't like anyone arguing with him, huh?"

"Okay, this was your idea, Supes," Firestorm said. "So what do we do now?"

"We divide our forces and we go."

"That simple, huh?"

Superman-2 smiled. "Wouldn't that be nice for a change?"

Eighty-one

When I reappeared at the dawn of time, I was a ghost again, standing on that spit of land floating above the black hole and its event horizon. About three hundred yards away I saw the Anti-Monitor talking to my other self. That Flash then disappeared and I realized he was traveling back to the future where I'd just been.

He was also the reason I was a ghost again. Physics wouldn't allow both my physical selves to be in the place at the same time. If he was corporeal, then I couldn't be.

I knew in ten second, he would be in the land of the dead. In less than ten minutes, we would be in the Monitor's limboverse, convincing the others to join me here, this time seconds after my other self disappeared into the future. It wouldn't be a good idea for them to see me.

The paradoxes of time was the stuff of headaches and nightmares.

On cue, the others appeared behind me. The two Supermans, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Lady Quark, and Captain Atom, the most powerful of them, would lead the attack from the front. Hourman, Uncle Sam, J'onn J'onzz, Power Girl, Broot, Element Lad, and the rest of them moved into flank and rear positions to his prevent escape.

"I've been waiting for you," the Anti-Monitor said. "I was certain the Flash would not disappoint me."

He was waiting for them? I suddenly realized what I had done.

"Attack!" Superman-1 hurtled at the Anti-Monitor. The others followed closely behind.

I shouted at them. *"Go back. Get out of here."*

Of course they couldn't hear me.

Superman-1 bore down on the Anti-Monitor, jackhammering his fists into him. "What did you do to the Flash? Where is he?"

With each rapid-fire punch I saw Superman weaken. Then, with an excruciating groan, he collapsed, moaning in pain.

One by one the others fell, too. Touching the Anti-Monitor instantly drained them of their powers.

The Anti-Monitor stared at my friends, all but unconscious. "Your unceasing attacks weakened me," he said. "I did not have the power to again breach the walls of creation. But now, because you unwittingly journeyed here with the ludicrous idea that you could stop me, your dying energies will feed mine. Do you understand what you have done? Your power will make it possible for me to destroy the multiverse forever."

Without raising a fist to strike back, the Anti-Monitor defeated the most powerful heroes in the universe.

And they had me to thank for that.

I had led my friends into a trap.

The Spectre

Once they arrived on the planet Oa, the Spectre divided his warriors into two factions: one would provide protection while the other assisted him in stopping Krona.

The lead team consisted of the villains headed by Lex Luthor, Superman's archenemy. At any other moment in time Luthor would have led them against the heroes, but universal genocide, he begrudgingly admitted, made him very willing if not strange bed-fellows.

Besides, Luthor reasoned, once the universe was safe, he would have a powerful army at his disposal. *All the better to negotiate settlements with.*

"The Oans will attempt to stop us," the Spectre explained. "You will prevent that, but you must not harm them."

Luthor nodded in agreement. "No problem. We'll treat them with kid gloves." *Like hell we will.*

The Spectre knew the Oans would be waiting. He had already tried to reason with them, but, with their typical condescending attitudes, they rejected his warnings.

"We can protect ourselves," they told him. "And we do not allow outsiders on our world. Please leave now."

The Spectre frowned and tried again. "You have to understand the threat the universe faces."

Garas of the Oan High Council smiled contemptuously. "Your presence is unnecessary. There is no force in the universe we cannot deal with."

The Spectre shook his head in disbelief. "You're prideful to the point of self-destruction."

"Go now, ghost, and do not return," Garas said, dismissing him. "But should you try, be aware we possess great power."

History warned the Spectre the Oans would refuse his help. They would ineffectually beg Krona to stop his experiments and he would, nonetheless, proceed defiantly. But, the Spectre realized, the Oans' shame would shatter their arrogance. Their terrible mistake would eventually lead them to create the Green Lantern Corps.

The Spectre also knew Luthor and his team would ignore his warnings, too, and try to kill the Oans. Let them try. The Oans were all but immortal and no force of villains from Earth could do anything more than hold them at bay.

But that was all the Spectre needed them to do.

Krona stared at the swirling forces forming in front of them. "Look at this," he exclaimed to the other Oans. They continued to plead with him to stop his unauthorized experiment, and he continued to ignore them. "This is the dawn of time. This is the moment of creation."

Toran tried to reason with him again. "Krona, please. You know when Afrahemm reached into that unknown, the Shibborith galaxy, with more than one million worlds, vanished. Now you want to open the door wider?"

Krona ignored him and pushed him back. "You always were the timid one, Toran. Knowledge should never be forbidden."

The mists parted and a hand began to form and reach up through the churning energies. "It's not possible. A hand? But whose?"

Was this, Krona wondered, the hand of God himself?

Even as he backed away in fear, Toran stared at the growing hand. "There are stars clustered in its palm. Was this how the universe was born?"

The other Oans tried to disrupt the image. "Shut it down now, Krona. Before..."

But it was already too late.

Eighty-two

I watched as the Anti-Monitor stood before the black hole and pushed his hand, now burning with fire, through it.

It was his hand, not God's, that Krona saw on the planet Oa and that Pariah had watched destroy his world.

In another moment, he would release the antimatter star cluster. It would insinuate itself throughout all existence. It would abort the birth of the multiverse.

In that single terrible instant, the Anti-Monitor would destroy all creation.

"Don't do this." I saw Pariah run to the Anti-Monitor. He screamed and wailed as he hammered his fist into the villain's armor.

"This is all my fault," he shouted. "My experiment destroyed the universe once. I won't let you do it again."

The Anti-Monitor glowered at him. "Are you such a fool that you believe a meager scientific investigation could unleash such cataclysmic forces?"

"What do you mean?" Pariah was shaking with alarm.

"You merely had the misfortune to open the portal in time to watch me unravel the fabric of creation. I created the multiverse to give birth to my antimatter universe. Had my brother not forced us both into that long sleep, I would have then destroyed all the weakened universes."

Pariah was shaken. "Then I didn't kill my people? The universes didn't die because of me?"

Lady Quark stared at Pariah. "You didn't murder my family?"

"But why can't I die?" Pariah shouted. "Why am I brought from universe to universe to watch its destruction?"

The Anti-Monitor laughed as he pushed his hand deeper into the black hole.

I saw his fingers begin to open and release the star cluster.

He stopped suddenly. He forced his hand, trying to push it deeper into the churning maw, but instead he was being pushed back. "What is this?" he shouted, confused.

I already knew the answer.

A second hand, white skinned and sinewy, had grabbed the first.

The Spectre had reached Oa.

"Now. Do it now," the Spectre screamed as he strained to push the Anti-Monitor's hand back through the mists.

The Spectre's second team brought together Dr. Fate, Zatana, Sargon, and more than a dozen other mages and sorcerers. Their powers would join his, increasing his own already formidable abilities.

The sorcerers, hands clasped together, formed a circle around him. They began to recite their mystic chants.

The Anti-Monitor fought back. "Krona, open the damnable portal," he shouted. "Do it now, you fool."

The Spectre and the Anti-Monitor struggled back and forth. I was watching a galactic arm wrestling match and the fate of all existence was the prize.

The Anti-Monitor knew all he needed was to open his fingers and free his antimatter star cluster. Whether he did it high above the black hole or just inside it didn't matter. Once released the cluster would instantly destroy all life.

The Spectre felt his arm pushed back up through the hole. "I am not strong enough. I need more power," he screamed. "I need more strength." But the sorcerers had no more to give.

That was when I realized how much of a fool I really was.

I wasn't alive and I wasn't matter.

I was pure energy.

Eighty-three

I ran past the Anti-Monitor and through the black hole to Oa. On the other side the Spectre strained to push the Anti-Monitor's hand back through the swirling mists. I could see he was beginning to weaken.

The sorcerers encircled him. I recognized only a few of them, but if any of us survived I'd worry about learning their names later.

I knew I was ethereal. That had been sadly proven to me time and again, but at this moment, not existing as a living human being was a good thing.

The sorcerers were locked in a circle, hands clasped together. An unbroken circuit.

I breathed in deeply and then ran through them, one after the other, continuing the loop. If they felt anything as I passed between their atoms, it could only have been a momentary shudder of power.

I was an energy transmitter, and each time I completed the circle I gave a fraction of my energy to them. I ran faster, picking up speed with each revolution.

My legs quickly weakened and my insides burned, but I couldn't stop now. Too many others had already sacrificed their lives for me to give up and say, "Well, I tried. Sorry."

I ran. I had to keep supplying them with energy so they could pass it on to the Spectre.

I thought of Iris. Not because my mind was wandering, but because she gave me my strength. She was my goal, my inspiration to not surrender to the multiplying pain.

The Spectre's back muscles bunched and tightened. With increasing strength, he thrust his hand into the black hole with even more force.

Despite my mistakes, despite nearly leading the others to their deaths and the universes to their destruction, we were succeeding.

I ran, faster and faster.

How could I have been such an idiot? The Anti-Monitor had set me up perfectly. He led me to bring the heroes to him and, like a fool, I did exactly what he wanted.

I heard the Spectre scream as our energy funneled into him. With a final, desperate push, he forced the Anti-Monitor's hand completely through the black hole.

The universe shuddered.

And creation began all over again.

PART FOUR

AFTERSHOCK

In the beginning there was a multiverse. But then the universes shuddered and died. In that very instant, at the dawn of all time, a new universe was born. And what had been many, was now just one.

—The Monitor Tapes Vol. 2 Pg. 957

Eighty-four

The universe was reborn. The hows, whys, and wherefores, all T's crossed and all I's dotted, weren't important now.

I opened my eyes to find myself in the speed force: colors swirled around me and I felt calm, happy, and ready to pitch my tent permanently here.

Couldn't have happened to a more deserving guy.

I didn't bother to slow down and think—the cornerstone of the sciences I had embraced all my life—and because of that I nearly destroyed everything.

My first thought was to find the former speedsters who brought me here. Unfortunately, all I saw were those 1970s Peter Max rainbow colors. I guessed everyone else was sitting on some cloud somewhere, comparing the size of their speed bumps.

Maybe I shouldn't be concerned that they were ignoring me. They may be the spirits of speedsters past, but they obviously weren't all that bright. After all, they picked the wrong guy to do their bidding.

"Speed freaks, listen up," I shouted into the ether, as much to get their attention as to relieve my overwhelming guilt. "Why didn't you recruit Supergirl? She was almost as fast as me and she wouldn't have screwed things up."

I was mad, not at the unseen spirits who lived here, but at myself.

I didn't expect an answer, and when I got one I couldn't have been more surprised.

"You have not failed. You are not done."

"What do you mean I'm not finished?" I shouted as I ran toward the colors. "For God's sakes, don't send me back."

Which, of course, is exactly what they did.

Eighty-five

I was in the telecommunications room on the Monitor's satellite, obviously sent back in time to before its destruction. I felt the hard steel floor under me and knew I was, in a manner of speaking, corporeal again. Dead but still not allowed to rest.

"Look at this, Barry." The Monitor was behind me and pointed to one of his view screens.

"I'm finished watching movies. Why are you keeping me alive?"

"Because I'm afraid you're not done," he said.

That was no longer good enough. I was tired and I was angry at myself. "Yeah. Guess what? It's over. I nearly killed everyone. I want out."

The Monitor smiled as he turned back to the view screen. "I'm not God, Barry. No matter what you think, I don't make those decisions. Now look at this."

I saw a young girl adrift at sea, desperately grasping a small plank of rotting, floating wood. Despite her age I recognized her. "That's Lyla."

"In the next few minutes I'm going to save her. Then twenty years from now she will kill me."

This time I wanted answers. "If you know that, then why?"

"Because she will bring all of you to me. For all my power, I can't do that. So I needed Lyla. And I needed Pariah. And to save the heroes who must die, I needed young Alex. And he won't even be born for two more decades."

He paused then looked directly at me. "But most of all, Barry, I needed you."

I knew why I was here. My ability to move through the multiverse made me valuable to both him and the Anti-Monitor. But I didn't care about me

now. "What do you mean Alex is needed to save the heroes who have to die?"

All he said was, "Come with me."

From inside his satellite, I was once again staring at the event horizon surrounding that same black hole at the dawn of time. Like three day old fish and unwanted relatives, this place was starting to get real old. "Barry, I believe you've been here before."

"Yeah. And like a Quarter Pounder, it keeps coming back."

We watched as the black hole collapsed into itself. There was a moment of eerie stillness and then it suddenly exploded.

Once again I watched the birth of the universe.

Star matter disgorged in all directions and sent its burning magma throughout previously empty space.

The satellite followed more than two hundred billion such chunks of smoldering star stuff as the Big Bang propelled them far from their point of origin.

Almost immediately I knew what was happening: These burning balls of rock and lava were the very basis of the Milky Way galaxy. In cosmic terms, I was nearly home.

The Milky Way is a spiral, spinning out arms of stars and planets. Even before we arrived I knew we would settle into one of its minor arms, the Orion spur, more than 26,000 light years from its galactic center.

I saw the sun form and nearly a dozen planets take shape around it, some so small and distant from the ball of fire I knew would one day be called Earth that they have not yet been detected by man.

The Monitor pointed to Earth. "To weaken the fabric of reality, my brother turned a single universe into a multiverse. But you and your friends have changed his history. That multiverse is no more. What was many has again become one."

I watched as the Earth cooled and crusted over. Through its light I saw oceans form. Soon, I knew, cells would merge and split, from the seas and rivers primitive life would crawl to take their first breath.

"There is only one positive matter universe now, Barry. And to balance it, a single antimatter universe. It is as was intended."

"One home instead of infinite earths," I said.

We watched as the age of dinosaurs was superseded by the birth of man. "Because in this recreated reality there never was a multiverse," he explained, "Earth now has a single unified history. It is known and accepted by everyone."

I watched Rome be built in a lot less than a day. An instant later great steam engines groaned their way across the American plains. As I turned back to the Monitor, a space ship made the first manned landing on the moon.

"Then we're done?" I asked.

He shook his head and once again I disappeared.

Eighty-six

I was on Earth-3, sent back in time to before the universe was reborn. Ultraman of the Crime Syndicate hovered in mid air next to Power Ring. Above them the skies turned red. I knew what was coming next, but I didn't understand why I was here. *Didn't we just rebuild the whole damn universe?*

I heard a *gasp* above me. Alexander Luthor, personal jets strapped to a skin-tight red and blue uniform, was flying just barely ahead of the antimatter wall.

I followed him home.

Luthor kissed his wife, Lois, first on the lips and then on her swollen belly. "You okay?" She was smiling but I could hear her sigh. "Relax. Nothing's happening today. I feel great."

As they had dinner I knew Lois could see him fidget nervously, barely listening to anything she said. "You're going to be working late. I can tell. But before you do, c'mon. I think you need a snuggle."

I let them go off alone. Being a ghost was bad enough. Being a Peeping Tom ghost would have been pushing things.

I went to his study though I already knew I didn't have the physical presence to boot his copmuter let alone access any of his files. I sort of sat down and waited.

Luthor entered the lab about an hour later, poured himself some coffee and began his work.

"Skies don't color shift without reason. Something is happening." He put down his cup then looked up to God. "Give me a clue. Anything will do."

I heard the Monitor's voice speak to me. "Tell him," he said. "You need to tell him what to do."

Like he'll hear me. But I looked at him and laughed and said, "The red skies are just the beginning."

He turned, confused, looking around him. "Who's there? Where are you?"

Hold the phone! He heard me?

I finally understood why I was sent here. I also realized I had very little time.

"Alexander, a wall of antimatter will sweep over this planet and destroy everything."

"Wait a second. You know me? Who are you?"

I had no time to give him my resume.

"This planet is already dead, but there are other Earths that can still be saved."

"Other Earths?" He was trying to find the source of the voice. God bless, I hoped he could. It would make my job a helluva lot easier.

"Luthor, you need to save your son."

I knew that would get to him. "My son?"

"This is what you have to do."

As quickly as I could I gave him all the information he'd need to send his son to Earth-1's universe. I didn't know the Monitor's coordinates so I gave him the position of the JLA satellite. Alex could be rescued from there.

The Monitor said he was unable to bring the ones he needed to him. That was why Harbinger was sent to recruit his warriors and why I was sent to bring Alex to him.

The circle closed. The Monitor would now have everyone he needed in place.

Luthor cried out to me. "Wait. How do you know I'm going to have a son?"

I felt the Monitor pulling me away. As I disappeared, I heard Lois call him.

"Alex, it's time, she said. "My water just broke."

Anti-Monitor

The positive matter universe recreated itself around him and he knew its indivisible strength vastly exceeded his own. *What had gone wrong?*

He destroyed and absorbed the energies of countless universes without meeting resistance. *Why has this final universe refused to accept its inevitable fate?*

The Anti-Monitor stood atop his sprawling fortress and gazed at the seemingly infinite breadth of his antimatter universe. As before, Qward was its only planet, but, he sensed, in its rebirth it was now devoid of both Thunderers and shadows.

He was alone, a master without slaves.

That, he knew, would have to change.

With his arms held high, he felt the forces of antimatter pour into him, strengthening him. To finally destroy the positive matter universe, he reluctantly understood that his antimatter universe would have to die as well.

"Brother, you have not yet beaten me," he shouted into the immutable blackness of space. "I will have my revenge."

The Anti-Monitor was prepared to die as long as he took the rest of creation with him.

Clark Kent

Clark yawned as he woke, stretched and felt his neck muscles crack, snapping into place. "Man, what a horrible dream," he sighed. "It was the end of everything. Our Earth, Kal-El's, all the universes."

He turned to Lois but she wasn't at his side. "Weird. She never gets up before me."

He looked around the bedroom, but didn't recognize it. The colors and decor were all different. "Where am I?" he wondered.

Clark made his way to the kitchen. "Lois?" There still was no answer.

He saw himself in the hallway mirror. A few more age lines creased his forehead that weren't there before, and the gray in his temples was still migrating its way to the rest of his formerly thick, black hair.

That was expected, of course. He was nearly seventy-five.

The bathroom door creaked open. Needs some WD-40, he reminded himself. "Lois?"

He rushed down the hallway as a tall figure stepped through the steam, a bath towel wrapped around his waist.

"Clark?" he said, surprised. "Is that you?"

He was staring at the other Clark Kent, the one from Earth-1. "What are you doing here?"

The younger Clark stared at him. "This is my apartment. What are *you* doing here?"

Harbinger spoke slowly, not for their sakes but for her own. The Monitor explained what would happen only once. She needed to be careful now not to make any mistakes in the retelling. "The five Earths merged along with their universes," she said. "Only one universe now exists."

During the previous hours she brought the heroes to the Justice League satellite. She knew they were confused by the new Earth they saw. Little of what survived jibed with their memories.

"This isn't Earth-1 or Earth-2 or any of the others," she explained. "It's a new Earth, combined from all of them."

Green Lantern listened quietly to the explanations, but finally interrupted. "Nobody remembers the crisis except us. Everyone else thinks this is the same Earth it's always been."

"That's because it is." Superman-1 was beginning to understand what happened. "The Earth was reformed at the dawn of time. In the reborn universe there never were infinite Earths. This is the only Earth that's ever existed."

"So how come I remember the other one?" Blue Beetle asked. "And how come there's no Hub City on this Earth? I mean, that's where I was born. That's where I lived all my life. What happened to it?"

"What about the people?" Superman-2 asked. "Which ones are still alive?"

"I don't know that yet," Harbinger said. *Why didn't the Monitor tell me what to say?*

A suspicious fear gripped Superman-2. *No. It'll be okay. It has to be okay.*

He saw Blue Beetle and Captain Marvel sitting across from him. Half way down the conference table Uncle Sam pressed forward in his chair, waiting for an answer. "What about Earth 4, Earth-S, and Earth-X? Is anyone else from those Earths still alive?"

"I can't answer that," Harbinger replied. "Except for those of you who stood before the dawn of time, there can only exist one of each primal genetic coding."

He knew the answer even before he turned to Superman-1. "Then there's only one Lois Lane on the Earth. Are you telling me my wife's gone as if she never existed. Is that why I woke up in his apartment? Answer me, Lyla. Except for me, does any of my life still exist?"

"Superman, I don't know."

"So why am I still here?"

Superman-1 frowned as he gazed out of the JLA satellite toward Earth floating 22,300 miles below them. "I think we're going to find many differences between our memories and this new reality," he said wistfully.

Pressing his fingers to his temple Firestorm shook his head in despair. "Anyone got a really big aspirin? I'm definitely getting a migraine like nobody's business."

Superman was still looking at the Earth, wondering how life was going to change—how do I explain two Clarks? How do I explain two *Superman?*,—when he felt a rolling shudder ripple through the satellite.

The others assumed the shuddering was a solar flare. It happened often out here in space. But instead of dissipating, the shaking increased.

Superman turned back to the Earth. A churning vortex was forming around it, drawing the planet into a giant maw.

"We've got to get out of here," he shouted. But the vortex suddenly expanded and swallowed them, too.

There was infinite darkness.

Superman-1 knew where they had been taken, and it frightened him. It felt like it was only moments ago that Kara had been murdered here before his eyes.

"Not again."

"Welcome to my universe," the Anti-Monitor said. "And welcome to your doom."

Eighty-seven

You said you'd help me." The voice was shrill and on the edge of losing control. "You said they'd come to save me. Why did you leave me here all alone? Why, Flash, why?"

The Psycho Pirate was in tears as he tried to pull my old uniform out from the under the castle stones that had fallen atop it. It was as if freeing it would somehow free him.

"Come back, Flash," he kept crying. "You promised to help me. You promised."

My uniform and my ring were all that survived my death. It was torn and nearly unrecognizable, much like the rest of my so-called life.

I was at the door of the Anti-Monitor's fortress as my friends slowly made their way here. They looked so tired. I didn't know what kept holding them together.

"My ring's not picking him up anywhere," Green Lantern said. "Where is he?"

"He's here. Don't worry," Superman grimly said.

They made their way across the rubble. The fortress had been pretty much demolished in their last fight and the stone and debris obstacle course complicated their progress through the heavily littered courtyards.

Wally walked alongside them and I rushed to him. I wanted to hug him and let him know how much I loved him, but I knew I couldn't.

"Barry?"

He was looking at me.

"Wally?" I reached out to take his hand, but I was already disappearing.

Wonder Woman searched the area. "There's nobody here. Who were you talking to?"

"I thought I saw Barry."

Captain Marvel looked around him. "Isn't he dead?"

Wally shook his head. "He was calling to me. I know he was."

He took off at super-speed. "He's here. I know he is."

I stayed at his side until he finally stopped running.

In front of him was the Psycho Pirate, still tugging at the last remnants of my old costume.

"C'mon, Flash, save me the way you said you would. You're one of the good guys, right?" He was still yelling at my uniform as if I were inside it. "Good guys never lie."

Wally grabbed the Pirate and easily flung him aside. "Let go of that. You have no right to touch it." He hit the Pirate again, slamming him into the stone.

"He said you'd save me. He said you'd save me."

I tried to pull Wally away from the Pirate but he kept hitting Hayden, screaming in rage as he did. Then, abruptly, he was pulled back.

"Kid Flash, that's enough," Superman-1 said. "Look at him. It's over."

The Pirate was lying on the rocks. His eyes stared blankly into space. He muttered to himself, repeating the same words over and over again. "He said you'd save me. He said you'd save me."

His mind was gone.

It was unexpected, but despite everything he had done to me, I still felt sorry for him.

I saw Lady Quark hunkered over something resting on one of the rock ledges. "I found this," she said, holding it up to the others. "It's a ring with a lightning bolt insignia."

Wally grabbed it from her. "Barry's Flash ring." He turned to the others. "Then he really is gone."

Superman tapped the stones aside and picked up my torn uniform. "He was a good friend," he said as he gave it to Wally. "And an even better man."

"I will miss him," agreed Wonder Woman. "We all will."

Wally kept staring at the ring. "Everything good I am I owe to him. It's not fair he died here alone."

I wanted so much to let him know that he shouldn't cry for me. Whatever was going to happen I knew I would be all right.

"He's here." Pariah called to them. "Hurry before it is too late."

Wally folded the tattered remains of my costume and lay them carefully on a rock. As if it were a cushion, he put my ring atop it then turned solemnly to the others.

"The Anti-Monitor's *mine*," he said.

He was already inside the fortress before the others could take a step.

Kid Flash Earth-1

Wally, are you all right?" he heard Flash ask him.

As his eyes focused he realized he was lying on his back on the police lab floor. He felt cold and wet. There was broken glass everywhere.

"Barry? Was that lightning? All I remember is falling. What happened?"

He started to get up. "Careful," Flash said as he swept away the jars and vials that shattered across the floor. "The lightning bolt hitting those chemicals is exactly what turned me into the Flash."

Wally West was the president of the Blue Valley Flash fan club. Actually, he was its only member. On his summer vacation trip to Central City his Aunt Iris had brought him to meet her boyfriend, police forensics scientist Barry Allen and Barry promised to introduce him to the Flash.

This was going to be his best vacation ever.

Little did he know.

He remembered Barry was pleasant enough. Most adults barely tolerated fifteen-year-old boys, but Barry seemed to genuinely care for him as he gave the nickel tour of Central City police headquarters and told him about the different criminals who once occupied every holding cell. Barry even took a Polaroid picture of him behind bars, rattling them as if he was demanding his freedom. *I'm innocent, I tell you. It wasn't me who robbed that bank.*

Their final stop was Barry's lab.

"You know the Flash sometimes works here," Barry said. "He has a private office. I bet he's in it right now."

Wally couldn't believe his luck. *The Flash was actually here? Just beyond that door?* Of course he didn't realize he'd just spent the entire

morning walking alongside the Flash. He'd learn that Flash fact much later on.

Wally remembered how nervous he was when he turned that doorknob and went inside. He felt a rush of air and then he saw the Flash standing in the corner, looking over some notes. The Flash waved him inside.

Why didn't I look back to thank Barry? He wondered. Ofcourse, since he was now costumed and standing in front of me, that would have blown everything.

Iris's boyfriend, as nice as he was, didn't matter to him then. Wally was staring at his idol. The Flash, the fastest man alive, was just a handshake in front of him.

"Hi, Wally," Flash said.

Wally was too nervous to talk. Flash gestured for him to sit down and then proceeded to ask him a few questions. *Do you have any hobbies? What's your favorite subject in school? What do you want to be when you grow up?* With each tremulous answer, Wally's nervousness began to vanish.

"So, how did you become so fast?" Wally finally found the courage to ask. He wrote down the Flash's every word as if he was a reporter like his Aunt Iris and he was writing a story for his fan club of one.

Flash laughed. "It was pretty much a miracle. There was a bolt of lightning, and then..."

The sound was like a cannon going off. Then there was silence and blackness.

"Wally, are you all right?"

The lightning struck him. Just as it hit the Flash.

Standing in the entrance way to the Anti-Monitor's fortress, waiting for the other heroes to join him, Kid Flash glanced back toward Barry's torn costume, neatly folded on the rock, his ring glittering atop it.

There was no body but there was also no doubt. Barry was dead. The best man he ever knew was gone.

Wally tried not to think about his own father, Rudy West. It was better to think about the positive, to remember the man who built dreams instead of the one who tore them apart.

Barry had quickly become more than just his mentor. Over the years, his very real friendship and patient counseling transformed him into Wally's surrogate father.

When Wally got angry and sullen, which happened all too often as he matured into his late teens and began to understand the abuse that chipped

away at him daily, it was Barry's easy-going manner that always brought him out of his dark funk.

"What we do is really amazing," Barry would tell him. "One second you're at home in Blue Valley and the next you could be sitting in some cafe in Casablanca."

Barry would look him in the eye and smile encouragingly. "Troubles are transient."

Wally shook his head. "Are you saying I should run away from them?"

He remembered Barry's laugh. They were walking by the Thames in London and could have passed for any father and son. "Hardly. You have to solve your problems. Isn't that what we do when we're fighting the Trickster or Captain Boomerang?"

"I don't understand," Wally remembered saying.

"As bad as things seem when those crazies are tossing one bizarre weapon at us after another, we still fight them, don't we? And we beat them. What's going on at home isn't adamantine, Wally. If there's something wrong, it can be changed."

"I don't know if I can."

"You're Wally West," Barry said to him. "I've seen you do the impossible. And you're smarter and stronger than you realize you are."

"Yeah, right," Wally laughed.

Barry looked at him warmly. "I know you still think of yourself as the kid I met back in my lab, but you're not him anymore. That kid is gone."

He remembered Barry stopped walking. Somewhere behind them Big Ben chimed three PM. "When I was your age I couldn't do a third of the things I've seen you accomplish. One of these days you're going to be the best of all of us."

"Never better than you."

"I am pretty good, aren't I?" He laughed. "But you know, maybe it only proves I'm an idiot, but I never give up. And I'm pretty sure you won't, either."

Kid Flash gave the others a weak smile as they made their way to the entrance. "What took you so long?"

Superman-1 nodded somberly and took the lead. "We can't all be Kid Flash. C'mon, let's do this."

"That kid is gone."

As they pushed toward the castle's center, Wally realized he could no longer see Barry's torn and tattered uniform.

The world doesn't need a Kid Flash, he suddenly understood.

But it'll always need a Flash.

"Rest well, Barry," he said softly to himself. "You will be remembered."

Eighty-eight

In the middle of a courtyard in the exact center of the fortress, that they found the Anti-Monitor waiting for them.

"Welcome to my universe. Now prepare to..."

The Anti-Monitor never got to finish.

The two Supermans, Lady Quark, Captain Marvel, Captain Atom, and the others launched a simultaneous attack.

At the same time, the Spectre led the mages and sorcerers toward the antimatter universe's sole black sun. Snuff out the source of the Anti-Monitor's power and his strength would quickly fail.

Alexander Luthor and Pariah, combining their dimension-spanning powers, led a third contingent of heroes to return the Earth to its newly reformed universe.

I recognized Batman's hand in this three-pronged attack. He might not have had the powers to physically fight the Anti-Monitor, but he was one of the best strategists I'd ever known.

Because we're often seen more as icons than as people, super heroes are usually lumped together as if we were one, cut from the same skin-tight latex cloth. Despite what others believe, as people, human and otherwise, we're as varied and different as everyone else.

But our powers, however subtly different they might be, do fit into more definable categories.

There is, most obviously, the strong guys. They specialize in the potentially dangerous close-range attacks. The Supermans, Captain Marvel and about a dozen others fit that loose description.

They attacked physically, pummeling the Anti-Monitor with their fists,

or as necessary, their whole body. Batman's plan was for them to strike hard, then quickly retreat to avoid the Anti-Monitor's counterattack. Seconds later they would launch a new strike, this time from a different angle, repeating their hit and run tactics.

As usual, they fought with relentless ferocity. They were also dangerously shortening the already narrow gap between each assault.

There were also the long-range blasters. Captain Atom, Firestorm, The Ray, Starfire, Lady Quark and most of the others fit into that category. As did the Supermans, when they used their heat vision instead of their fists.

In some cases, the categories of powers overlapped.

The blasters' powers, although similar, were not the same. Some were nuclear in origin, others solar, still others had a more naturally explosive touch.

Firing at the Anti-Monitor from a distance was perhaps somewhat safer than a close-range fist fight, but their attacks had to be perfectly timed to strike exactly between each of the strong guy blows. A mistimed power blast could hit one of their allies instead.

The mages and sorcerers were the most difficult to explain. I was a scientist and believed wholly in the consistent and logical laws of physics. The sorcerers' powers, however, came from some place beyond my understanding.

Perhaps, if I had wanted to, I could have ascertained whether, instead of supernaturally creating some spell, they were actually drawing their so-called mystic energies from another dimension or place, tapping a source of power still unknown to me.

I could accept changing matter into energy and that would allow me to scientifically explain away their seemingly unexplainable abilities. Everything in my ordered world would then remain neat and tidy.

But, because I believed in faith, I allowed myself the notion that science might not explain everything. For someone who cherished the magic of my precious comic books and movies, where art and emotion often transcended logic, it was probably better that way.

Some things need no definition.

For once our timing couldn't have gone better. The mages surrounded the anti-matter sun with a globe of supernatural energy. As long as they could hold it in place, the sun's antimatter power could not penetrate their combined shields.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Monitor reeled from the combined assault of the strong guys and the power blasters. They attacked from all sides, seemingly at once, pushing him off balance. As soon as he reached to grab one of them, five others moved in for their attack.

Each blast may have been little more than a gnat sting to him, but they kept coming, building with intensity. He railed against the power blasters, but they moved too quickly to be struck.

He stumbled back, his body caving under the relentless attack. He frantically tried to draw more power from his sun, but it was now far beyond his reach.

With a terrible scream, the Anti-Monitor burst into light then fell.

I almost couldn't believe it, but it was over.

Eighty-nine

*D*ing dong, the witch is dead." Firestorm was singing as he danced around the Anti-Monitor's body. "Which old Witch? The Wicked Witch! Ding Dong! The Wicked Witch is dead."

Wonder Woman knelt beside the Anti-Monitor. "Are we sure?"

Superman-2 scanned him with his X-Ray vision. He then turned to Diana with a closed-lipped smile. "No heart beat."

"Partayy! Partayy! Partayy!" Firestorm shouted as he continued his dance.

Superman-1 shook his head. "We've suffered too many casualties. Celebrating is the last thing on my mind now."

I saw Firestorm's face turn white as he stopped dancing. "I'm sorry, Superman. I wasn't thinking."

Superman looked around. "Anyone know how Alex is doing?"

We made our way off Qward and in its shadow saw Alex. His matter/antimatter body was now immense, dwarfing the Earth which was very slowly moving through him.

With Pariah's help, he was using his own body to create the portal back to our universe.

"Hurry. Go through me now." His voice faltered as he struggled with each word. "I can't keep this open much longer. Go before you're trapped here forever."

"You heard him," Superman-1 said to the others. "Go."

The heroes followed the Earth into the portal. From a distance, they were a stream of gaudy colors disappearing inside it. I couldn't have been more proud of all of them.

"Faster," Alex shouted again. "It's closing."

I saw the Supermans rushing back and forth, helping the slower heroes to the portal then flying back to find others.

As always, they amazed me. I didn't know if I could ever be as selfless.

A handful of heroes straggled behind the others. Wonder Woman looked back. "Are we sure we have everyone?"

Superman-2's telescopic vision swept the area. "Far as I see. Guess that means it's time."

"You humans are still here?"

I knew that voice.

Damn.

Ninety

The Anti-Monitor was standing behind us.

His armor was gone and his chalk-white skin was mostly burned off him. The muscle beneath was blistered and still bubbling with fire. In places you could see jagged chunks of bone cutting through torn tissue.

With every step the flames ate at him, but he still lumbered toward us.

"I am not done."

He no longer cared about some ultimate victory. All he wanted now was to kill us.

Only the Supermans were here with me. I was, as usual, useless, but I knew they didn't have a fraction of the power to fight him on their own.

Superman-1 lunged for him. "Attack!" he screamed.

"No!" Superman-2 grabbed him. "Go to Earth. I can do this on my own"

"You're insane. You can't." Superman-1 struggled to pull free, but his older doppelganger, despite having only half his power, held on firmly.

"You can't fight him alone."

"My Lois is gone. She was my life," he said. "And in this newborn universe, my Krypton never existed. Do you realize what that means, Kal-El? If I hadn't gone back in time with you, I wouldn't exist either."

"But...."

"You have your life. I won't let you sacrifice it."

Superman-1 resisted, but Superman-2 smiled at him. "Please kiss your Lois for me. And for your own sake, let her know how much she means to you."

I don't know where he found his strength, but he took Superman-1 and threw him through Alex's portal.

I saw Superman-1 regain flight control and begin to soar back, but the portal closed before he could reach it.

Superman-2 and I were now trapped in this universe together.

The Anti-Monitor slowly made his way closer to us. His still-flaming body was now reduced to a fiery ball of energy.

"You stayed behind, Kryptonian? Then you are the greatest fool I have ever known."

Superman grinned in agreement. "Somebody had to take out the garbage. Guess I was elected."

He flew at the Anti-Monitor, striking him hard then retreated. He was using Batman's hit and run tactic.

The Anti-Monitor reeled with each blow, but he continued onward.

What remained of his left hand reached out and a fiery blast of power crushed into Superman. He fell back and I saw he was bleeding all over.

The Anti-Monitor screamed at him. "My strength regenerates. I will destroy you."

Superman could barely move but I watched in astonishment as he slowly pulled himself up. "Destroy me? Hell, you've already destroyed too many precious lives," he said. "In this universe you had all the power you needed, but you killed because you wanted more. Because life has no meaning to you."

His knees buckled for a moment but he forced himself to stand tall. Then, almost faster than I could follow, he launched himself at the Anti-Monitor.

"Well, guess what?" he shouted. "I've had enough."

His hands tightly balled into fists, he rocketed at the Anti-Monitor. His eyes were narrow and determined. This was his final attack and he knew it had to work.

The trouble was, I knew it couldn't. As strong as Superman was, he was not nearly strong enough.

I knew something else, too.

I had exactly one second to help him.

Ninety-one

I had to run faster than I had ever run before.

In less than a tenth of a second I was in the speed force, moving too quickly to see the swirling colors I knew were all around. Too fast to be lulled into comfort, to want to forget my mission and stay here for the rest of eternity.

God, I'd been running so fast and for so long I wished I could find my peace. Instead, I put on another burst of speed.

Another tenth of a second. Another. Four tenths of a second had passed. I was falling behind schedule.

In another tenth of a second, I was in the Spectre's afterworld.

This was the land of the dead, and, as it existed out of time and space, it was not affected when the multiverse merged into one.

I saw Green Arrow, Nighthawk, Lord Volt, and his daughter, Princess Fern. I also saw Kole, The Huntress, the Monitor, and the members of the Crime Syndicate. There were hundreds of them, heroes and villains from an infinity of destroyed universes.

They all died in the Crisis and they were making their way through the mists of their world's shadowlands toward the light that promised them their final rest.

They couldn't come back with me, I knew that. Because of my power only I'd been spared.

But their powers. Boy, I could use their powers now.

I ran to the front of the line. The light—or whatever it was—glowed just ahead of me. By putting on another burst of speed and running into it, I knew I could end it now. But I also knew there was no chance of that happening. I couldn't be that lucky.

Near the front of the line I saw an elderly woman talking to a much younger one. She was asking her endless questions. She didn't see me but I found myself smiling at her.

I looked up, as if up is where God somehow resided. "Hope you don't mind, but that one over there, you're going to have to wait for her a few seconds more."

I ran to the front, blocking their way into the light. "I need you," I said. I looked at the others in line. "This literally won't take a second, but I need all of you."

Ninety-two

Less than a thirtieth of a second remained as I returned to the antimatter dimension. I saw Superman-2 about to slam headlong into the Anti-Monitor.

I ran at him and for an instant our bodies merged.

The dead heroes, even the villains, were gone, but they had all willingly given their power to me.

And now I was sharing their final gift with Clark.

Kal-L of Krypton was no longer just Superman. Part of him was Ultraman, Power Ring, and all the other Crime Syndicate villains of Earth-3.

He was the sorcerer Arion and the Crystal-weaver Kole. He was the Justice Alliance of Earth-D, Aquagirl, the Icicle, the magical Prince Raman, and so many others.

There were those who died when the white wall of antimatter swept across their Earths. They had no special power of their own, but they gave their spirit and determination.

Finally, he was also Kara. Supergirl was at the front of the line, leading the others—some things never change—to their final rest.

They all lent their strength and their will to Superman. When he hit the Anti-Monitor, they all struck him as a unified force.

And, before that final fraction of a second ticked into place, it was over.

The powerful Shockwaves from the Anti-Monitor's death rippled through the antimatter universe. They spread in all directions. We saw the wave coming at us, hungry to tear us apart.

Without thinking, I grabbed Kal-L's hand to pull him away. I felt solid flesh then saw him staring at me.

"Flash?" he said.

"Guess this means you can see me. Boo?"

"I thought you were..."

"Yeah," I laughed. "But it's not so bad, really. You'll get used to it."

As the Shockwaves washed over where we'd been standing, we were already gone.

We stood on a jagged peak overlooking Earth's shadowlands. It stretched further than we could see, disappearing into the thickening mists.

Somehow it was calming to know this place existed.

"Where are we?" Kal asked.

"Don't talk," I said. "Hurry."

He looked at the line of people making their way toward whatever awaited them.

"I don't understand."

"Just go," I said again. "There's someone waiting for you at the front of the line."

He looked at me strangely then launched himself over the crowd. He paused in mid-air, looked ahead for a moment, sorting through the crowd, then turned back to me with the most wonderful smile on his face.

He took his position at the front of the line and reached his hand out. Lois took it then gave him a long kiss. "You sure took your sweet time, Clark."

"You know me," he replied. "Always goofing off."

"By the way, you know what today is?"

He didn't. "No. What?"

"Thursday. Today's Thursday."

She took his hand and they disappeared together into the light.

I looked around as I waited. "Hey! Forget me? When is it my turn?" My evil guardian angel voice obviously didn't want to answer me this time.

"C'mon. I did everything you asked."

I was getting annoyed. The Anti-Monitor was dead, this time for good. The universe was reborn. There was now a single Earth and enough heroes on it to help keep it safe. Hell, I even turned the lights off when I left. "I don't want to wait anymore."

The voice must have heard me, because I suddenly disappeared.

Ninety-three

I was back in Missouri, very close to home.

I followed interstate 74 through Granite Peak National Park south to Central City. It was October and the leaves were a breadbasket mosaic of bright oranges, purples, reds and yellows.

Iris and I would often come here early Sunday mornings, lay out a large ratty blanket, open my old "Range Rider" thermos filled with hot coffee instead of milk, pick at the pastries I bought the night before from Anderson's bakery, and lay back watching the sun come up. Strangely, I never took those moments for granted. I always understood exactly how precious they were.

The city's "Home of The Flash, population nine hundred thousand plus, Rotary, Oddfellows, Moose" sign was on the interstate two miles north of town, just as it had always been. Seeing my name painted three feet high, as if I were Central City's only reason to exist, always embarrassed me, but it felt especially good now to see it again.

I ran south and east through City Center, past Dexter Myles' Flash Museum—a little more run-down than I remembered, but still in good shape.

A second later I was standing in front of our home in Danville. I don't know why I was drawn here again, but considering everything else that recently happened to me, I didn't mind.

The house seemed a bit different, a brighter green and freshly painted. There was a row of miniature yellow rose bushes tucked under the dining room window that had not been there before. I stepped onto the porch and saw that the swing set was new as well.

What time period had I been sent to ?

Was this the past, before Iris and I bought the house? The Schwartzes used to have roses in front, before I got the bright idea of surprising Iris by ripping them out and replacing them with irises. Iris, iris. Too cool for school, I thought.

She, of course, made certain my days as part-time horticulturist ended right then.

I stood on the porch, also freshly painted, and stepped through the locked door to the hallway and the living room beyond.

A silver-haired older woman was sitting on the couch, her back to me, sipping tea. In front of her was a boy no more than eleven. He shifted back and forth as the woman—he called her 'Grandma'—chastised him for something he had obviously done wrong.

"You can't keep breaking things, Bart. Don't make me be angry with you."

The boy squirmed as he stammered his apologies. "I'm sorry, grandma. It's just I can't, you know, stand still. It's like I'm just dead if I'm not running somewhere at the speed of light."

The speed of—what?

My throat dried instantly and I was sure my heart stopped.

The woman sitting in front of me was nearly sixty years old, but there was no mistaking her beautiful hazel-green eyes.

I was looking at Iris.

Ninety-four

She was alive. She had lived through the Crisis. I stared for what seemed forever, just to make sure what I thought I was looking at was actually what I was looking at. But I already knew the truth.

Bart was attempting to explain away whatever mischief he had done, and I saw Iris try to stifle the smile that kept forcing its way to her lips.

"I'll be better, Grandma. I promise."

"I know you will. Especially since you'll have lots of time to think about what you've been doing wrong."

Bart looked nervous. Something told me he'd been down this road before. "No, Grandma, don't. You can't...."

Iris smiled at him and my heart melted. God, how I loved that smile. "No video games for two weeks," she said calmly.

"I'll die. I can't do it. You know I can't."

"Two weeks, Bart. And you're also grounded."

"No, no. Please don't do that. Uncle Wally needs me."

Wally? Kid Flash was still in Central City?

Iris took his hand and pulled him closer to her. "I think the Flash can deal with fighting crime by himself for a little bit. Now go to your room."

Wally took my name.

"But, Grandma...."

Iris leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "I love you, Bart, but if you want to follow in the footsteps of your uncle and your grandfather, you'll have to learn discipline."

Bart glowered at her then disappeared up the stairs.

Iris waited until she heard the bedroom door slam shut, then stood and

walked to the fireplace. Her stride was slower than it used to be, but, God bless her, it was still strong and defiant.

She took our wedding photo from the mantle and held it for a long time.

"You'd love him. God, he's exactly like you. I just wish...." She shook for a second then clamped her lips shut. She stared at the photograph a few moments longer and softly kissed it.

I watched her walk to the window seat still holding our photograph, then sit down, looking out to the street. Her eyes glazed over but she was still smiling.

I felt something pulling at me. "No," I shouted. "Not now. I need more time."

I sat beside Iris and put my hand over hers. She couldn't feel me, but her hand shook just a bit before settling again.

Quietly, we sat there as we had done so many times before. The houses across the street hadn't been built then, and we had had an unblocked view into what we knew would be a wonderful future together.

Finally, I felt that pull again. "Okay," I said.

I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. She tilted her head in the way that always melted my heart. "Barry?"

She looked at our picture resting in her lap. "I love you," she said.

"I love you, too" I replied as I felt myself being pulled away.

The speed force reached out and took my hand.

I didn't protest.

It was time to stop running.

-END-

